



MY TRIVIAL LIFE

AND

MISFORTUNE



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BY
A PLAIN WOMAN

A GOSSIP WITH NO PLOT IN PARTICULAR

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. III.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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MY TRIVIAL LIFE AND MISFORTUNE.

Book IV

CHAPTER I.

DAVID and I were not married without difficulty. When Aunt Jane heard I intended to marry David Scott, she was grievously offended and much shocked. Her transitions from silent huffiness to indignant lamentation, and from lamentation to tears, were very puzzling. My aunt grieved, and amused, and astounded me, and all at once! She wept a good deal, yet I saw she not only cried, because she liked to cry, but also because, for some reason or other, she thought it right and proper to shed tears. As to poor David, she utterly confounded him! He made her a very kind little speech on meeting her for the first time after I had announced his proposal, and asked her consent to our marriage, and begged her blessing. I had told

him on no account to forget the blessing, and I confess that I had expected the pleasure of blessing David would have instantly shortened my aunt's upper lip ; instead of which, down, down, down came that lip !

"Yes, indeed, Mr Scott," said Aunt Jane, in the voice of an ill-used woman ; "I know you proposed to Sophy, because Sophy told me you did, and I was so much shocked when I heard it, that Snipkins says I have never been well since, and certainly I was quite horrified, because . . ."

"Horrified ? . . ." exclaimed David ; but he found my aunt was talking on, and not listening to him in the slightest degree. Aunt Jane was in full sail, and he had yet to learn that any attempt at interruption has only the effect of making her repeat her last words over again, so as to recover weigh for the next sentence. She was saying—"I was quite horrified, because when you proposed to Sophy she ought not to have given you any answer . . ."

"Mrs Sherbrook . . ."

"Any answer for at least a week, for Sophy ought to have taken at least a week or ten days, or even a fortnight, to consider whether by trying with all her might she possibly could love you . . ."

"Mrs Sherbrook ! I implore . . ."

"Whether she could ever love you in her whole life . . ."

"Mrs Sherbrook ! Mrs Sherbrook . . ."

"Yes, she ought to have thought for a very long time, if she ever could love you at all, because it really

looks now as if Sophy thought she liked you before you ever proposed to her . . .”

“Aunt Jane!” cried I.

“Be quiet, Sophy!” said my aunt; “it really does look, Mr Scott, as if Sophy thought she liked you before ever you proposed to her, and that is a very shocking and very dreadful thing, because no nice young lady should ever think she likes a gentleman until he has proposed for her to her relations.”

David looked at me and smiled. Aunt Jane saw him smile, so the lip which had been going up a little from the pleasure of talking, came down again as far as it could come, and that is a pretty long way!

“Mr Scott,” said my aunt, “a gentleman,”—she laid marked emphasis on the word,—“a gentleman should first propose to a lady’s nearest relations, and if they approve, then he may propose to the lady herself.”

“But, really, Mrs Sherbrook . . .” began David.

My aunt was not yet out of breath—“Though, Mr Scott,” she continued, “I do not think Edward and I would have accepted you for Sophy, if Sophy had not first accepted you herself, because we both think that, unfortunately, you are not a bit suited to her . . .”

“Aunt Jane!” cried I.

“No, Sophy, not a bit suited! because you want a very sensible husband indeed, and a man of sound and serious views, who would always be trying to correct your faults.”

“Oh! but, Aunt Jane!” I exclaimed, “I should hate to marry a man who would be occupied through life

in correcting my faults! It is my faults want a lover, and not my virtues!"

"You may argue if you like, Sophy," replied my aunt; "you always do argue! but I know exactly the sort of person you ought to marry, if ever you marry at all, though I think you are quite unsuited to marry any one, or to have a house of your own, as you are not at all clever, and never do anything at regular hours; but if you do insist on being obstinate and ungrateful, and marrying somebody and going away from your uncle and me, you ought at least to wait some years till you are old enough to know your own mind, and then I should know beforehand you intended to marry, and I might therefore be the means, under Providence, of making you marry some one who would have your highest interest at heart,—some truly Christian gentleman who . . ."

David had abandoned the forlorn hope of being able to interrupt Aunt Jane. I was in a perfect fever, for I did not know what she might say next, or how long she might be saying it, and I saw she would make David think her an intolerable bore, and this grieved me, because I knew how he hated a bore, and I did not want him to dislike poor Aunt Jane. Yet for all this, the scene was diverting, as David had expected some little compliment in return for his polite speech.

Aunt Jane was running on about the Christian gentleman, and telling us what she would think it her duty to say if such a man proposed to her in future years for Sophy, when the door opened and in hobbled

Mrs Stewart. She seized the situation by instinct. "My dear Mrs Sherbrook," she instantly exclaimed, "that bandage has got twisted on my ankle, and no one can settle it but you! You have spoilt me, my dear Mrs Sherbrook!" Aunt Jane flew to her poor, dear cripple, and eagerly offered her arm, and in half a minute she was safe away bandaging her Catherine in another room. Mrs Stewart was not against our marriage.

For a moment David stood speechless, as if Aunt Jane's words were still flowing in his ear, then burst into fit upon fit of laughter. I was delighted to hear him laugh, as I had feared he might consider Aunt Jane a serious and not an amusing bore. "The idea of my proposing first to her!" cried he; "it is the finest idea ever invented!" This notion amused him more than anything else my aunt had said. He laughed over it as if it were an inexhaustible comedy to his imagination.

"Well, really, David," said I, trying to excuse Aunt Jane, and make her seem a little more sensible than she appeared—"I believe it was the fashion in Aunt Jane's youth for a gentleman to go through several stages of propriety and proposal, paying his addresses through surrounding relations, until, at last, he came to the lady herself: like a giraffe, he went stretching and stretching his neck till he touched the green leaf of his hopes."

"Sophy," replied David, "the world has changed since Mrs Sherbrook's youth."

"But not to her, David! The world never changes to people like Aunt Jane and Uncle Sherbrook."

After a moment's silence, David said to me gravely—"Sophy, forgive me if I seem too curious or unkind, and tell me the real truth just as if we were man and wife, and I were not asking an impertinent question. Is your aunt . . . what is called *wanting*? deficient, I mean, . . . or . . . or . . . decidedly imbecile?"

"Oh dear, no!" cried I; "nothing at all decided about her anyway! It is quite undecided still whether she has an intellect or not. Most people think she has; she thinks so herself; and indeed she is generally spoken of as a most sensible, estimable person. Aunt Jane looks so wise that if she would only talk less, I am sure half the world would think her clever, but unluckily for her reputation, she was wound up at the creation, and has never thoroughly unwound herself yet. Oh, my dear David! there are hundreds, there are thousands of women in the world like Aunt Jane! Some talk as much, and some talk less; seen from a distance, some are considered very wise and some a little wise; but to all such as intimately know them, their mind gives despair! Yet they pass muster perfectly in life."

David agreed with me in thinking there are hundreds of women who have minds much on a pattern with Aunt Jane's. He said, "Now there is my Aunt Arabella; she is very kind, but decidedly not brilliant. However, Sophy," he added, "I think she is cleverer than your Aunt Jane."

"Certainly, David!" I exclaimed—"certainly! Her mind is better knit together. Lady Arabella intermarries her friends with but little confusion, while Aunt Jane is quite capable of marrying a lady to every gentleman in the United Kingdom except her own husband, particularly if the lady is of Scotch extraction."

David laughed at this, and said, "Ah! indeed, Miss Sophy, however my Aunt Arabella may marry people in theory, believe me she thinks herself remarkably clever at marrying her neighbours in practice. She is very proud of our match!"

"Nonsense, David!" I retorted angrily—"nonsense! She likes the reputation of match-making, but we made our own match. She had nothing on earth to say to it!"

The delusion that David and I had not fallen in love unaided, which seemed to have taken possession of everybody I knew, except Aunt Jane, annoyed me more than I can tell.

On returning to the Abbey from town, Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone called to pay a duty visit, and also to congratulate my aunt and me. I was not in the room when she arrived, but I entered it as she was leaving. This is how Jumping Georgy congratulated me,—“Not at all surprised, Sophy!” said she; “Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart is a very clever woman—very! and Lady Arabella is no bad hand at that sort of thing! saw it all at Mineham! but Louisa was in the way then; glad to say she is out of it now!”

“Thankee!” said I; and I considered *Thankee!* exactly what such a speech deserved.

It provoked me to find Uncle Sherbrook was even more convinced than any one else that I had been entrapped into marrying, and that it was quite impossible I could be in love with David; but I was touched when I discovered that much of his disbelief in my affection for David came from his believing in the affection I felt for him. “I did not think you would leave me, Sophy, as I imagined you were perfectly happy and contented in my house, and therefore I thought you would remain with me until my dissolution. You would not have had to wait long, child, as I have passed the threescore years and ten allotted to man on earth.” He said these words sadly, almost tenderly; they grieved me, and made me remember how I had vowed to stand beside my uncle in his old age, and to be a strong-hearted friend to him. I recalled this oft-repeated vow of mine with a pang very like remorse. I had forgotten it! I had forgotten everything in my love for David Scott.

I had the greatest difficulty in gaining Uncle Sherbrook’s consent to my marriage. He called David a “penniless adventurer, who will want settlements made on him, but can’t settle a penny himself,” and declared Mrs Stewart had made up the match for me. “Do not contradict me, Sophy; I will not hear a word in her favour.” And then my uncle did indeed surprise me! He gave utterance to the most astounding

sentiments ; he was guilty of sacrilege against the best of women. He called her a busybody, an intriguer, a match-maker ! He wished to Heaven she had not sprained her ankle, and declared that now she had come to stay in his house, he foresaw she would never go away again. He wondered why she could not live in Scotland with her husband's relations. In short, Uncle Sherbrook was not only guilty of sacrilege, but of high treason. He amazed me ! And amused me too—yet not for long. My heart grieved for the old man. I saw he was getting to hate the saint who clearly intended to live in his house, and I pitied him, because I knew he would never be able to get rid of her. I knew he would put off the battle from day to day till it was too late. It is not easy to quarrel with the woman who rules your own wife ; besides, Uncle Sherbrook was not what he used to be : the lion could still roar, but he had lost his back teeth.

When at last I did manage to coax a grudging, unwilling sort of consent from my uncle, his only consolation seemed to be that he and Mr Jones could "*tie up*" all my money on myself in such a manner that David could not touch a penny of it.

"Sophy," said Uncle Sherbrook with fierce determination,—*"Sophy, every single penny shall be tied up on you. Jones and I will tie it up. He shall not be able to touch a sixpence without your consent."*

My uncle frightened me. "Poor David !" said I ; "he is not my mortal enemy ! and you speak as if he were my enemy and a thief."

"Sophy," replied my uncle, sternly, "you may trust me to do what is best for your interest." And then his manner softened, and he said, with a look of grave pleasure, "You have trusted me now for fully three years, and have never once questioned or doubted me. You have signed every document I laid before you, and when I have asked if you desired to read the contents of a paper, you have trusted me, and you have signed the deed, and have not read it." To my great surprise his voice betrayed emotion. He again repeated, "You have trusted me," and paused. "Sophy," he continued, "Sophy, . . . you . . . you are richer than you think."

Uncle Sherbrook told me the £800 a-year left under my father's will to my mother for life, and then to me, had increased to considerably over £2000 a-year. It seems my property consists of some land in the north of England, a part of which lies in the manufacturing districts. There is one field in particular bringing me in £900 a-year, my uncle having leased it to a neighbouring coal-mine. "What luck!" cried I. As far as I could judge, this field is the luckiest bit of my property; but the rest, my uncle explained to me, is fast rising in value.

I was enchanted to find I was richer than I thought. I thanked my uncle vehemently. I could not thank him half enough. I threw my arms round his neck, and actually embraced him in my excess of joy. He did not push me from him. He let me kiss him twice, and thank him many times. Too sudden a

rush of amiability into the constitution, thought I, is a bad sign of a man's health.

I should have been alarmed by the change in my uncle, had he not all of a sudden returned to his old voice and manner. "Sophy," he remarked, severely, "your marriage shall make no difference in the management of your affairs, as I will continue to manage your property for you all the same." I did not know what to say to this, so I said nothing. Uncle Sherbrook, looking almost ferocious, again repeated what he had said before: "Every penny shall be tied up on you. That fellow shall not be able to touch a farthing of your property. Jones and I will tie it up."

I was delighted beyond measure to think I had two thousand a-year. Two thousand a-year! I thought that greater riches than it is. Two thousand a-year! Why, David only wanted money to do great things in life, and I had money to give him now.

"Davie, Davie," said I, "I am so rich! I am quite a lady of fortune! I have more than £2000 a-year! Only think—more than two thousand a-year!" David scanned me with a quick, searching glance, and looked as if there was some word which craved to be spoken lying on the very tip of his tongue. "What is it, David?" I asked, thus answering the expression of his eloquent face. He reddened. He hesitated, as if he could not give utterance to what he fain would say. He looked away, and then looked at me again, and said in a low voice, almost like the

voice of shame, "Is this, then, a surprise to you, Sophy?" The idea that Uncle Sherbrook may have said something to him about settlements, something reproachful and indelicate, rushed across my mind, and seemed to explain David's evident embarrassment. I blushed more deeply than he, feeling that money matters, like copper coin in a satin purse, soil the rich beauty of love.

"Davie," I said, "you and I will have money enough between us. We are both richer than we thought, so we will live in England, and never, never think of those dreadful colonies again. By-the-by," cried I, with sudden recollection, "how was it I met you that day on the hill at the very hour when Mrs Stewart told me you were sailing from Sheerness? I have forgotten to ask you, and oh, it is such a mystery to me!"

"Where was I sailing from?" inquired David.

"Sheerness."

"And where was I going to?"

"David, are you mad?"

"By Jove! never was saner in my life. Where was I going to, Sophy?"

"New Zealand."

"Well done, Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart!" he exclaimed, laughing heartily; "and I never thought of going anywhere but to Scotland for the Twelfth, and that only if you did not accept me. Well done, Mrs Stewart! No wonder that clever lady converts people by the dozen! for when they know her they

must be afraid to go to hell with her! She will make too much mischief there."

David then told me how disappointed and angry he had been not to see me that day when he called at Sherbrook Hall immediately after luncheon. "And we came by Mrs Stewart's special appointment," said he. "I drove *tête-à-tête* with Aunt Arabella on purpose to meet you, and speak to you, and propose to you, if I could; and I was horribly bored those nine long miles." He said Mrs Stewart quickly perceived he was annoyed at not seeing me, and declared I had heard the carriage coming along the avenue, and had disappeared on purpose; "but no sooner did she put me in a passion with you, Sophy, than she calmed me by saying that I must indeed have very little experience of life if I did not know what sort of feeling it was which made a woman fear to meet a man."

I winced at these words, but said nothing.

"I understood her," said David; "she saw I understood her: so when I was leaving she whispered if I would walk on the path over the hill the following afternoon, you would surely be there to meet me. And you were there, Sophy." He took my hand—"You were there."

"Yet would to God," I said, "we had not owed our happiness to lying tricks!"

But David did not share my indignation against Catherine Stewart. He said he could not be angry with such a useful person—"for, Sophy, what with your Aunt Jane's tears and your Uncle Sherbrook's

conviction that you are marrying against your will, we should never get married if Mrs Stewart were not determined on the match. The admirable Catherine, as you call her, is anxious to get rid of you. I dare say you are often in her way when she is humbugging your Aunt Jane. She will not object to our speedy wedding, I can tell you."

I could not forgive Mrs Stewart then and there, as David did. Yet I soon forgot not to forgive her. Indeed, to tell the truth, strange as it may seem, I soon felt more charitably disposed towards her than I had ever done in my life, simply because my own great happiness made me feel kindly disposed towards every human being. Our own joy will idealise the whole world. I could find no room for hatred in my heart. It is longing disappointment craving in vain for a love that can satisfy, which gives the empty place to bitterness and unforgiving indignation. Nothing makes us so charitable as our own happiness. Not that the charity of the happy heart is a virtue to be praised. I felt it was only an instinct, and nothing more.

However, it was not very long before my charity towards the admirable Catherine began to cool—the cause of our renewed enmity being the choice of the clergyman who should marry me. Mrs Stewart was determined I should be married by Mr Thunderbore, while I declared war in favour of the Reverend James.

I was firmly resolved to be married by the Rector

of the parish, or else, I had told Mrs Stewart, not to be married at all. I gave David my reasons for this, and he thought them good ones. He entered all the more easily into my views, because he disliked Mr Thunderbore's *type and antetype* sermons, and feared this great light might discourse at the altar on the "types and antetypes" of marriage, drawing endless comparisons from Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, the Christian Church, and the golden vessels of the Tabernacle. And David well knew when Mr Thunderbore began to talk of the golden vessels of the Tabernacle, that only a miracle could stop him. We had once heard him preach for an hour and ten minutes on the text, "And the tongs thereof and the snuff dishes thereof shall be of pure gold." In this simple commandment, Mr Thunderbore had discovered an *antetype* (whatever that may be) of the millennium, and a type of our Lord's first coming, besides symbols of the narrow tenets of the Jewish faith, of the broader dogmas of Christianity, and types of the sect-like nature of the Levitical priesthood under the old dispensation, and of the free, open character of the clergy of the Church of England under the new one.

As David and I were both obstinately determined to be married by the Reverend James, I carried the disputed point into the study, and appealed to Uncle Sherbrook. I was glad to find my wish to be married by the Rector pleased him, and moreover relieved him of a serious apprehension. He commended me for the wish, told me to be firm, and said it would be an

insult to the Rector of the parish if I were married by Mr Thunderbore in Harefield Church,—“And more especially when you are married from my house, Sophy. It is by no means my desire that James should be insulted.”

I saw the clannish Scotch blood again ran unchecked in my uncle's veins, and that to him his relations were always his relations, and never strangers. No matter what they might do, or what my uncle might be made to think of them, they had the right divine to be recognised as kinsmen before all the world.

With but little persuasion I induced Uncle Sherbrook to come with me to the rectory, and himself ask his cousin to perform the ceremony. My uncle's head was so full of settlements that he had not perception for anything else; and I thought I could trust him not to see the M.B. waistcoat or the long-flapped Ritualistic coat.

James Sherbrook received us with much tact and courtesy, and behaved like the kind, good man he really is. My uncle's manner changed, and he became very kind to his cousin, and not overmuch imperious. He asked to see Mary, and solemnly invited her to the wedding, and even graciously extended the invitation to the two eldest boys and the two eldest girls.

There was high wrath when the admirable Catherine found peace had been concluded without her sanction between the rectory and the Hall. The best of women dared not fight openly with Uncle Sherbrook, and

Aunt Jane was the wretched substitute she had to put forward in her stead. Before long my uncle overawed my aunt by saying, "Jane, I have asked James to perform the sacred ceremony; and I have invited Mary and the four eldest children to the wedding. What is done, Jane, cannot be undone." These words invariably silenced Aunt Jane.

Mrs Stewart ventured a remark: "Quite right, Mr Sherbrook—quite right. It is far too late to alter matters now. Yet have you considered into what foolish and unnecessary expense you are leading Mary Sherbrook? Mary is always glad of an excuse to be extravagant, and buy new dresses."

Aunt Jane only sighed aloud, but Uncle Sherbrook said, "Thank you, Mrs Stewart, for reminding me of what I might otherwise have forgotten. Mary being my cousin's wife, should, I am aware, appear to advantage on a public occasion, and I shall take care she and the children have proper means placed at their disposal."

As my uncle was not a generous man in small things, such munificence on his part had never even been apprehended by Mrs Stewart. Her anger could not be concealed.

Uncle Sherbrook, being backed by me, was singularly firm and courageous. As for me, black looks were nothing to me now that I was in good spirits, and had a near escape at hand. My uncle also looked forward to finding a safe retreat in my new home in case of some hardly-fought victory or defeat. This hope

raised his courage. I told him I should have one small spare room ready for him in Montagu Square as soon as ever our honeymoon was over, and our foreign tour ended,—“but I am sorry to say, Uncle Sherbrook, it is only a bachelor’s room.” There was something in my uncle’s manner of accepting the invitation which made me think he considered the smallness of the accommodation a positive attraction.

“That is of no consequence, Sophy,” he said—“of no consequence whatever. Pray, do not think of putting yourself out in any way in order to make room for your Aunt Jane: she will be perfectly happy at home entertaining her friend, Mrs Stewart. Besides, Sophy,” he added, lowering his voice and glancing round the study as if Snipkins might have entered the room unawares, “the next time I can manage to go up to town without creating suspicion, I have very important business to transact.” He lowered his voice still more, and amazed me by “imparting to me in perfect confidence and secrecy,” as he termed it, the astonishing fact that he wished to get rid of Buggle! He informed me he had had some suspicions as to Mr Buggle’s uprightness and honesty for the last year. This being the case, I implored him not to lose an instant in dismissing the man. I told Uncle Sherbrook I deeply distrusted Mr Buggle, though I had no particular reason to give for my instinctive prejudice.

“Your aunt and Mrs Stewart,” he replied, “admire Buggle’s undoubted legal capacity. He has an extra-

ordinary influence over them, and they are his violent partisans. They would give me no peace were I to declare my intention of dismissing him. I will therefore wait, Sophy, until I can do so quietly, and away from them both. The matter once finally settled, I will tell your aunt what is done cannot be undone. That is the one argument she readily grasps."

My uncle's procrastination about dismissing Mr Buggle alarmed me, because I was sure he must have very good reason to think the attorney a rogue, or the notion of sending him away could never have entered his head. Neither Aunt Jane, nor Mrs Stewart, nor Snipkins, had questioned the soundness of Mr Buggle's doctrine. However, I found that no amount of persuasion would make Uncle Sherbrook dismiss his attorney until he should find himself at a safe distance from his own home; so I gave up the task in despair. The mixture of determination and weakness in my uncle's character puzzled me. The cowardice had grown upon him, and I feared it must be a sign of age;—not that I had much time to think over the psychology (as books call it) of the fact, for my imagination was just now full of a subject more engrossing than the peculiarities of near relations. My wedding-day grew nearer and nearer.

At last it came, and then, thank heaven! it was over.

I must allow that, on the whole, David and I were married more easily than I had dared to expect. Mrs Stewart had managed to put Aunt Jane into a good

humour. She had advised her to place the following request for prayer in her pet religious newspaper. There was a particular corner kept in this little tract-like publication expressly for such advertisements. Aunt Jane showed me the paragraph, and shook her head and sighed, and seemed to feel real satisfaction. These were the exact words:—"A Christian lady, whose unawakened niece is going to marry a young gentleman of doubtful religious principles, asks the prayers of Christian parents, uncles, aunts, and guardians."

We had merely a few near relations at our wedding—just the Sherbrooks, Lady Arabella, and the Rigardy-Wrenstones.

I know Rigardy-Wrenstone did grace our marriage by his presence, for I saw him and felt him doing the honours in church and at the breakfast with an easy condescension most flattering to us all, except, indeed, to Uncle Sherbrook, who would not be flattered by him, and who preferred doing the honours himself, especially in his own house.

So thoroughly and over-poweringly did Rigardy-Wrenstone do the honours in church, that to this day I am far from sure whether he or the Reverend James actually tied the sacred knot; but I rather think it was Rigardy-Wrenstone.

CHAPTER II.

WE went to Paris for our honeymoon, and I was astounded to find there are still Roman Catholics in France! I am well aware no Turk is a Mussulman and no black a heathen, but I had thought it equally certain no Frenchman was a Papist. I had fancied Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart had even converted the few infidels who, once upon a time, were straying about the country. I said I must write and tell Aunt Jane there were Roman Catholics in Paris. "She has not a notion of it, David; for you see in the highly-coloured reports her Catherine dresses up for the converting societies, France is a converted land, and Jules and Alphonse are as sound as Sambo."

David said he well knew what such reports were, for Mineham was strewn with them. He spoke with a severity amounting to hatred, of all "that sort of humbug," and declared he "abhorred the whole thing. And I believe," cried he, "the missionaries themselves are nothing but a pack of humbugs—a set of canting . . ."

I put my hand upon his mouth, and stopped the wicked sentence. "Oh, David," I said, "don't say such cruel, prejudiced words; it grieves me to the heart to hear them, for it pains me to think you should be unjust towards those noble men who, in sad exile from England, devote their life unselfishly to a holy cause."

"By Jove!" exclaimed David, jumping up: thrusting a hand into each trouser-pocket, he dived deeply therein, as if he were trying to get right down to the end of his surprise.—"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "Sophy, I don't understand you. I thought you hated Mrs Stewart's whole paraphernalia of charity—blacks, missionaries, and all!"

"Ah, Davie," I replied, "I should be glad to think you were the only person who would thus misunderstand me; but instinct tells me most people will do the same, and I am sorry for it! I am very sorry you think it is the missionary himself I dislike, when really I intensely honour and admire him. It is not the good man working for God in some unhealthy foreign hole, on the merest pittance of the money levied in our Lord's name, I dislike, but the flattered lady patroness at home; or still more, ten thousand times ten thousand more, do I hate the horde of pious harpies bothering, collecting, slightly peculating, and greatly intriguing!—those 'labourers worthy of their hire,' who debase charity into a vulgar trick for making desirable acquaintances; who don't care a straw for the poor missionary's real work, but who

live their own small worldly life on the good fame of his holy one!"

"I hate the race!" said David, fervently. And I repeated, "I hate them! It does one good," I cried, "to bring out the hatred from one's heart, and declare it openly." And I said again, "I hate them!"

"Those canting busybodies," exclaimed David, "are sometimes of the male sex; but oftener, Sophy, they are fussers of the female kind."

I said I knew it. "They are women, David, to whom rank and riches become a god, and to whom social advancement appears success in the kingdom of heaven; for they sanctify their worldliness, their actions, and their flattery with the peculiar language, and make even lying seem only a very pious way of telling almost exactly, if not quite, the truth. It is such as they, David, who parody and exaggerate the enthusiastic missionary's reports, till they make the charities they beg for ridiculous."

"Worse than ridiculous," said David; "for they make them disgusting with their canting twaddle."

To this I replied: "Well, David, you see they colour to please. Each lady patroness likes her own charity lauded, and her own particular sort of heathen turned into enlightened saints. So the pious toady glorifies Sambo into a state of moral and intellectual perfection which is simply absurd to those who know what the poor negro really is, and how low is the highest spiritual ideal ever reached by his Methody-banjo style of Christianity."

"As to those blacks," cried David, impatiently, "why, confound the blacks! The blacks be d—d!"

I was not as much shocked by David's exclamation as I ought to have been, and I quickly forgave it, because I well knew my husband had very great excuse for swearing at Sambo. I knew he had been sickened with Sambo till he positively detested him; so I merely said, "David, my dear, don't mind 'confounding' the blacks any more,—it is wicked; and then it is waste of energy, for Sambo has had his day. He has only an odd admirer left him here and there, like your Aunt Arabella who loved him in her youth, and cannot forget him now. He is out of fashion, David—believe me, he is! and the world has taken up quite another sort of savage, and a much more dangerous and ferocious one than Sambo! Why, there is that Duchess of Wildfire, she will only collect for her Christian Cossack; and I verily believe, no greater ruffian was ever turned into a saint. They say she is positively in love with him."

"Her grace," said David, "can fall in love with any man except her own husband."

"Because," I retorted, "the duke is only an Englishman, and as yet unconvicted of crime."

Here the conversation dropped, so I took up my pen and wrote to Aunt Jane, and told her there were still a few Roman Catholics in Paris, and, I believed, a few more in the rest of France.

I did not get the quick answer which I had fully expected so wonderful a piece of news would draw

forth. Indeed it was more than ten days before I heard from my aunt. I then received a letter, written in odd bits at six different times. Aunt Jane said she had been "so occupied with Catherine and with Edward that really, Sophy, I have not had a moment to myself;" and she added something about "poor dear Edward's" health, and Denis "teasing your uncle about those two oaks on the front avenue," and then the sentence broke off for that day, and never was taken up at the right place again. Trying to piece these odd bits in one's mind was much like taking a needle and trying to thread drops of water. The limp sentences written one day could not be strung to the limp ones written the next.

David would insist on reading this letter: he expected to be amused by Aunt Jane's surprise about the French Papists. He waded through the first sheet of note-paper well enough, but began shuffling the others backwards and forwards, declaring he must now draw lots as to which he would read next. "The whole affair," he exclaimed, "is a middle in a muddle, with neither beginning nor end! Your aunt drops down into the midst of a subject from the skies, and then with an *and* or a *because* drops down into the centre of another; but as she does not clear up a matter, she never quite leaves it, and twists backwards in her third page to the unfinished muddle of her first sentence. You never know where she is or who she is writing about." I must allow this was no bad description of the letter: having been written

at stray moments, it was a very confused specimen of Aunt Jane's naturally involved style.

"I can't make out for the life of me," said David impatiently, scattering the loose sheets all over the floor, "if it is Snipkins who wet your uncle's shoes or he who wet Snipkins', or you who wet both their feet, for, Sophy, you are somehow mixed up in the matter, and in everything else besides. You are unsound, and so is James Sherbrook, and your uncle is bilious, and it is you encouraged *him* and Catherine who did not; but I defy any one on earth to say if the *him* stands for your uncle, James Sherbrook, or the benighted French Papist. The only clear point is that Catherine has been the means, under Providence, of discouraging them all, especially James Sherbrook and the French Papist. As to that French Papist, he roams about the letter, first wrapped in one text, and then in another: he crops up everywhere, and increases the confusion tenfold. I could swear he even has a liver and wears a cold compress!"

"David" said I, "you exaggerate the confusion of my aunt's letter." Then truth forced me to add—"but not much, after all!"

Though the long rigmarole left no clear impression on my mind, it gave me, I could not exactly tell why, a feeling of general uneasiness about Uncle Sherbrook's health. There were more remarks than usual about wet feet and cold compresses, and Aunt Jane made them in different parts of the letter, as if "poor dear Edward's" ill-health were a permanent idea flow-

ing under and through all others. So I began to fear the internal Jesuit must be seriously upset. I went to the trouble of reading Aunt Jane's letter over again, and this time I paid particular attention to the sentence: "Denis has been teasing your uncle about those two oaks on the front avenue." I had not a notion what Aunt Jane could mean, but I guessed my cousin had invented some new way of annoying Uncle Sherbrook, and I was sorry to hear it.

In hopes of discovering if my uncle were really ill or well, I wrote to him myself, and the most concise and seriously sensible letter I could pen. I inquired particularly for his health, and begged him to consult Dr Daly if he did not feel well. I think my letter pleased Uncle Sherbrook, for I got an answer by return of post.

As a rule Englishwomen put the pith of a letter (if it has a pith) in the postscript, or at all events, well down in the fourth page; while Englishmen usually begin with the subject uppermost in their mind. Not because they wish to insure having plenty of room, for they never enlarge upon any matter: what they write, they write cautiously. A man who will talk openly and violently will write as if he expected you might bring an action for libel against him.

This was my uncle's letter:—

"DEAR SOPHY,—You may be unaware that the Wrenstone and Sherbrook estates are somewhat curiously intermixed. Your aunt's nephew holding a part

of his kitchen-garden and the piece of land covered by his flower-garden, from me; while I am forced to rent a small portion of my own lawn and front avenue from him.

"Your aunt's nephew has lately cut down some of the trees on his land. The two old oaks beside the front avenue were levelled to the ground early one morning, before there was time to apprise me of the trespass.

"I have taken the first opinion in London. Sir Wighead Pighead advises legal proceedings, and, moreover, says that I am entitled to heavy damages, the terms of my lease expressly annulling the landlord's right to cut timber until such time as the lease shall expire.

"Were I a younger man, I might perhaps be tempted to file a bill against your aunt's nephew, but I feel that at my time of life, the worry of such a lawsuit would be but a bad preparation for eternity. I cannot also refrain from reflecting that no lawsuit could make the old oaks grow again in my day.

"I have not had occasion to consult Dr Daly, my health being no worse than my age should lead me to expect. When threescore years and ten are past, the earthly pilgrimage is over.

"I am glad to hear a good account of you and your husband.—I remain, your affectionate uncle,

"E. BREWEN SHERBROOK."

"Ah!" said I, when we had both read this letter;

“Uncle Sherbrook is really ill. It is not the melancholy tone of the earthly pilgrimage and the threescore years and ten which makes me think so, for the earthly pilgrimage has been ending ever since I knew Uncle Sherbrook. That sort of gloom is no bad sign of him ! it is only a necessary part of his correspondence, just like Aunt Jane’s mortal coil which is always wearing away even when she writes to order a new dress. But, David, I tell you what does frighten me in this letter,—it is the sudden death of the old pugnacious spirit. When a man like Uncle Sherbrook no longer jumps at a lawsuit, believe me there is something radically wrong about his constitution.”

I was very angry with Rigardy-Wrenstone, especially as the two trees he had cut down were the only good oaks at Sherbrook Hall—all the old timber there being beechwood, except the three elms on the back avenue. David was even more indignant than I was ; a man who disapproves of another man’s conduct shows but little moderation in his wrath. My husband swore, “By Jove ! there were not many English gentlemen like that fellow Rigardy-Wrenstone.” “And yet he is not such a bad fellow after all,” said I ; “it is merely he never can manage to feel he is a great man except by making some one else feel little. He must have scope for his superfluous vanity, or it would fret his own flesh. They say, David, that rats gnaw incessantly, because otherwise their front teeth would grow too big and worry their own mouth, and my cousin’s vain conceit is just such a front

tooth ; it must have its mission in life ! But do not let us talk any more of Denis," I cried, "or of the little world he worries ! When I lived at Sherbrook with Rigardy-Wrenstone at the gate, and Aunt Jane indoors, I declare, David, I got to feel as if the world were no bigger than a threepenny bit ! Don't let us talk any more of Denis, or of the admirable Catherine, or of Aunt Jane. Talk to me, David, of the larger world, where you have been, and of literature, politics, and the great questions of the day."

I liked to make David speak on such subjects, for when he spoke he seemed to open a wide doorway to my mind, so that my imagination left the prison where it had lain for years, and went out with David's into broader paths than I had ever known before. The change from the unsympathetic and deadly stupid sort of meandering all-about-nothing talk I had so long been bored with, to David's quick, clear, brilliant, and yet perfectly natural conversation, was simply intoxicating. I used to feel fearfully dull when I listened to Aunt Jane, and now I felt quite clever ! And what excitement is there like the brightening delight of feeling quick and clever ? Intelligence is a sort of champagne we can drink from the cup of another, and that is why the society of clever witty people is so enchanting : we drink from their glass, and feel lively like them. No doubt a really clever person would feel clever chained to a bore on a desert island ; but a creature of my calibre depends for its liveliness on the brightness of others, and gets more or less identified

with the mental nature of those it lives with: as a jockey, it becomes a part of its mount. When I jogged along slowly on Aunt Jane's mind I rode upon a cart-horse, and felt my body was heavy, my legs were thick, and my hoofs were shod with lumbering shoes; but, leaping on David's light thoughts, I and my racer were one.

I ran great risk of thinking I had married the cleverest man in Europe. My hitherto pent-up ambition revelled in the career I saw before him. And as to my imagination, it worked wonders; it became a kind of parliamentary whip to David, gaining him no end of supporters, and, if I must confess all,—why, it made him prime minister rather early in life. But I kept the little secrets of the inventing vagabond within me, quite to myself. I was determined never to let David think me a silly woman; I shrank with horror from the idea of becoming to him, in the slightest degree, what Aunt Jane was to Uncle Sherbrook. My pride and deep affection revolted from the bare notion of such painful humiliation. I was aware, if silliness is to be admired and loved, she must come into the world with beauty as a dress, and even then must by no means outlive the fair raiment.

I knew I was ugly and sadly unattractive, and I had already perceived David was by nature a great admirer of beauty: you could not live with him and be blind to this fact. He had an eye for form and colour, and keen enjoyment of the beautiful in art,—that is, what seemed to him the beautiful. I was glad David had this taste, but I was not perhaps quite so well

pleased to find that beauty in womankind was just as delightful an object of contemplation to him as beauty in art. Dear David was of so open and truthful a nature, that he concealed no thought from me. I took care not to snub him, but received all he said with sympathy, even when it happened to be something a little unsatisfactory. I could not forget how, once upon a time, he had said to me, "I can speak to you as if I were speaking to myself. I feel at my ease in speaking to you." I hoped he might ever feel thus happily at ease with me, for it delighted me to think I was his pleasant companion, just as he was mine. Still, I was not married ten days before I began to wish with all my heart I could only be made over again. Not that I should have chosen to be remodelled after my own ideal of beauty, but rather after David's, though what he most admired was only half beautiful to my eye. When we went to the Louvre, he would stand longer before a Greuze than a Raphael. There was one Greuze he particularly admired; I forget if it was the head of a boy or a girl, for Greuze's boys and girls are much alike.

"What do you think of that face, Sophy?" asked David one day.

"Why," I said, "it is like Louisa Clarke, —all softness, and smiles, and floating blue eyes."

David answered eagerly, "Yes, Sophy, it is like her. I am glad you see the likeness. It is very like—what she used to be." And he gave me a glowing description of Louisa's beauty when first he met her. "She

was not clever, but she was a nice girl, Sophy, until she got into that fast, awfully-awful set, and was spoilt."

"Yes, David," I said, "I am sure she was nice, and I know she was pretty." I drew my arm within his, and, gently clasping my two hands over his hand, "Davie dear," I said, "shall we go and look at other pictures now, for we have stayed a long time gazing at this one?"

So he went with me into another room: but soon I missed him from my side, and, retracing my steps, I returned to find him staring at that Greuze again. When he saw it was I who touched him, he smiled, and said, "So you have found and caught me, Sophy! Now that you have me, keep me fast and carry me home, or, by Jove! I will stand gazing here all night. Take me prisoner," cried he, playfully drawing my hand through his arm, "and drag me away. I am like a child when a thing catches my eye, and for the life of me I can't help looking at it."

What David thus said of himself, more in fun than earnest, I found to be quite true. Little by little, I perceived there was a wellnigh irresistible attraction for him in whatever excited his sympathy, either by sight or feeling. I should say that sympathy, in one form or another, is the chief trait in his character. It is his strength and his weakness. It makes an uncommon man of him, for quick sympathy is rare in Englishmen. It is this instinct within him which makes David so moving a speaker. When he cares to

fascinate you, he does not talk to a theoretical myth or to posterity, but to your own particular mind and to your own living changing nature. You feel you are a distinct human being to him, and that as such, for the moment, you have a certain power over him.

I felt I made my own clear personal impression on him, and my vanity and heart alike were pleased. I hated being lost, like a grain of sand on a dusty road! I had been accustomed, ever since my mother's death, to feel I was really nothing and nobody; for after all, even to Uncle Sherbrook, I was only half a person. He was fond of me, and I of him; and I just fitted myself into his peculiarities, but he did not fit into mine. I was not a power within him, and I doubt if I were clearly an individual to him. I rather suspect he liked me because when I fitted into him he felt as if I were a bit of himself. But David has the sympathy which can imagine your personal existence, and he talks to you, and feels with you, and lives with you as if you were a distinct human being, and yet one whose heart and thoughts he can put in harmony with his. "Come, David," I would say, "and talk to me, and then I will feel I am myself. The novelty is delightful! It enchants me to find I am not really a bit of Uncle Sherbrook or Aunt Jane."

But it was not alone this new sense of equality which made me think marriage the happiest of all states; it was rather the right I found therein to love without reserve,—to ease my heart, and let the long-captive free. And then, if I loved David, I knew

he loved me too. I was sure he did, though perhaps not as much as I loved him. How could he love me as I loved him, when he was the attractive one, not I? From the first I knew my love was greater than his, so instinct warned me to give David's affection no shock, nor strain it overmuch until it had taken deep root in his heart. I was certain David could not think me as agreeable as I thought him. I had not read a book for the last three years, and hardly a newspaper, and I greatly feared he might find me dull if I took him away from the haunts of men and kept him strictly shut up all alone with myself for a whole month.

Mrs Stewart, Lady Arabella, Mary Sherbrook, Jumping Georgy,—nearly every one, in fact, even my aunt (though not my uncle), had taken it for granted we were to spend our honeymoon in Switzerland. Madame Julie Browne made me a dress expressly for the Alps.

We stopped in Paris on our way to those Alps, and I soon perceived David was in no hurry to proceed further. He told me he had "done" Switzerland twice over, and said he supposed we should have to "stick" in the valleys, as he thought ladies decidedly out of their element climbing the mountains. He seemed to think it would be considered quite a scandal were he to be seen on the top of Mont Blanc and I down in Chamounix. I pictured to myself David "sticking" with me in a mountain gorge during some three days' rain, and I was afraid at the sight I saw. I thought perhaps my husband's liveliness

might fail, and he might fancy it was I who bored him, and not the rain.

It cost me a good deal to give up our Swiss tour, for I myself liked the idea of two kindred souls honeymooning in some lonely mountain *châlet* far away from the commonplace world. So I was sadly disappointed at first, but I took comfort in reflecting that, even under much more favourable circumstances than ours, too rigid a system of secluded honeymoon had not altogether proved a success. I recalled to mind that our first parents came to sorrow in Paradise, and I remembered how ungenerously Adam had accused Eve of having tempted him to sin, just as if he were a little tired of her. I therefore smothered the longings of romance, and firmly determined David should not be too strictly imprisoned in the Garden of Eden.

I encouraged him to stay on in Paris, as he liked the theatres, and was always meeting "fellows" he knew in the street. To please him, I would ask these friends to dine, and I would encourage them to propose David should take a "constitutional" with them next day; for the sort of double-quick "constitutional" one "fellow" takes with another seems necessary to an Englishman's happiness on the Continent, and it is the want of it which often depresses him in foreign lands. I was soon consoled for the loss of my Swiss trip by seeing David well amused and in good spirits. If ever he betrayed a tendency to yawn, or seemed in the slightest degree less lively than usual, I instantly sent him off to pick up a "fellow" and take a walk! He

would return to me with a fresh mind, and sometimes even would enchant me by saying, "I am delighted to come back to you, Sophy! You are twice as pleasant as Jack Coventry!"

This compliment decidedly predisposed me in favour of Jack Coventry, and I was particularly glad when he met Jack, and did not meet a more agreeable man. Whenever Mr Coventry called, I asked him to dinner. Not that I cared for the man; he was too much of a polyglot foreigner for my taste, and was always abusing his own country. He spent the winters at Nice, and the summers everywhere except in England. David had met him some years ago abroad,—I rather think at Nice. I invited him pretty frequently.

Mr Coventry introduced David to a cousin of Sir Harry Hardup's, a certain "Tom Hardup," who, it appeared, had just lost his wife and buried her in Paris. Mr Coventry said this lady's illness and funeral had exhausted all "Tom Hardup's" circular notes, and that he was waiting in Paris for a remittance from his banker at home.

"*Et ~~en attendant~~*" said he, "as he owes a small bill to his landlord, the fool of a Frenchman keeps him a tight prisoner indoors. Awful bore for poor Tommy!"

*/pour le mo-
-ment/*

"Awfully hard lines," exclaimed David; "he seems no end of a good fellow!"

"The circumstances of his case are certainly peculiar," said I. "I wonder if it would be kind, David, to lend him some money?"

"Better take care, Sophy! I say, Coventry, she had better take care, had not she?—and beware?"

David laughed, and Mr Coventry laughed too, and rather curiously, I thought. I could not see the joke; but then I had not the honour of Mr Hardup's acquaintance.

Shortly after this remark of David's, Mr Coventry bade us good-night. Whenever he dined with us he left early. He told us this evening, for the first time, why he never stayed later. He said that he and his friend, the Viscomte de Bélicose, made a point of playing a quiet rubber every evening with the imprisoned widower Tom Hardup—*pour lui faire passer son temps, pauvre hère!* Like many naturalised English-Frenchmen, Mr Coventry shrugged his shoulders, and constantly said a whole sentence in French.

"Then," said I, giddily, "I suppose as you are only three, the disconsolate widower plays dummy with the spirit of his late wife?" But it appeared the late Mrs Hardup's ghost never played whist,—on the contrary, Mr Coventry declared that trying to find a fourth hand each night was the very plague of his existence.

"Now that Harry Beauchamp is gone," he said, "I am at my wits' end to find a man who will play!—*C'était là mon renfort de potage!* Fellows generally go to the theatre when they are passing through Paris; or else, Mrs Scott," he added, turning to me, "they are on their honeymoon, and strictly imprisoned under severe discipline."

I did not quite like this speech. "Mr Coventry," I

said, reproachfully, "a wife is not always the dragon you imagine. She does not invariably keep her husband under lock and key."

Mr Coventry paid me some high-flown, polyglot compliment, and bowed himself out of the room like a born Frenchman.

No sooner was he gone, than David exclaimed in an excited manner, "What on earth possessed you to let Jack Coventry know you don't keep a tight hand over me? Hang it, Sophy, you have got me into a scrape!"

"A scrape? Good gracious, David! What scrape?"

"Why, just this. Coventry and Hardup will be wanting me some night to make up a rubber of whist with them and their French viscount."

I saw nothing dreadful in this. "But, David," I answered, "I thought you liked whist?"

"So I do—sixpenny points, and that sort of thing!"

"Ah! I see," said I, laughing; "you born gambler! You think poor Mr Hardup can only stake a halfpenny on the game! So much the better for you all!"

"Halfpenny?" repeated David, scornfully; "halfponey, or a whole one, would be nearer the thing."

When David explained to me what a "poney" meant, I understood his fears, and felt alarmed, especially as he said, "For all I know, this French viscount of theirs may be the greatest black-leg in Europe."

"Surely," I exclaimed—"surely Mr Hardup would never have a black-leg at his house!"

David only laughed. He astounded me; for he laughed as if he thought such a scandal quite possible.

"Why, David," said I, in utter amazement, "I heard you call Mr Hardup *no end of a good fellow?*"

"And so he is, Sophy; you may like a fellow well enough, but you may not altogether like his line. It is his line I don't like."

The distinction seemed a subtle one to me. "For heaven's sake!" I cried, "keep clear of him, David, and keep clear of Mr Coventry too!"

David answered in the tone of a man who is not only laying down the law for others, but also for himself. "Then we will leave Paris immediately!" I repeated the words, "Leave Paris immediately?" in a maze of astonishment.

"You see, Sophy," said David—"you see, if I meet Coventry, and he wants me to take a hand with him, Hardup, and the Viscomte, what the deuce . . . I beg pardon!—but what . . . What the deuce am I to say?"

"Say you won't play."

"All very fine, Sophy—all very fine! but if a fellow presses you, a man can't say that; and Coventry has a way of asking a favour which makes it hard lines to refuse. Confound it, Sophy!—if you had only been prudent to-night, I might have vowed you would blow me up sky high if I dared to touch a card!—and that is a first-rate excuse during a man's honeymoon! I have intended to say that all along; for Coventry has

come very near the subject once or twice. He knows you are a sort of heiress, and now he will think you will pay if I lose. Hitherto I expect he feared you would leave me in the lurch, and cut me off to a shilling!"

"Abominable man!" cried I; "I will never ask him to dine again!"

David kept walking up and down the room in a state of irritable excitement, exclaiming, "Jack Coventry will think me a shirk! He will think me a coward if I don't play now, for I used to play at Nice when I had not your fortune to back me."

I asked with infinite contempt if it mattered to any one what Mr Coventry was pleased to think?

"But, Sophy," urged David, "when last we played, the luck was on my side; so you see Coventry will think I am bound in honour to give him the chance of retrieving former losses."

David and I had a regular argument on the subject. It provoked me to see what a slave he was to the opinion—even to the imaginary opinion—of this man; so I ended everything I said with the words, "After all, it does not matter what Mr Coventry may think. That is the real point. Mr Coventry's thoughts are of no importance. Mr Coventry is an utterly insignificant being."

When I had repeated this two or three times, David seemed to agree with me; but I fancied he did not do so very heartily—so I began to think that perhaps we seriously had better leave Paris next day. At first,

so extreme a measure had seemed an outrageously big precaution to take against the smallest possible bit of temptation,—I had even thought it ludicrous, and had laughed at the idea. But now I was changing my opinion. I said to my husband, “So it is settled we leave Paris to-morrow. David, you are right to go, and I am ready.”

Instead, however, of the ready assent I expected, I was surprised to hear David grumble something about the “bore of sticking in rainy valleys!”—in short, I saw he had altered his mind, and was hunting his brain to find some good reason for it.

“Sophy, I have it!” he exclaimed, suddenly. “I knew there was some particular reason to prevent us from starting to-morrow!—but I could not just think of it for the moment. It is the letter you are expecting! Don’t you remember? The letter you are expecting from Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart? Why, don’t you recollect telling me, Sophy, you had written to her saying we should wait on her here till you got her answer, so as to be near home if she gave a bad account of your uncle?”

I said, “But, David, we need not go far away, and the letter can easily be sent after us.”

However, David was certain the letter would be misdirected and lost. He waxed eloquent on the subject. The fact is, he had caught the small plank by which he wished to be saved: he wanted to stay on in Paris, and he had found an excuse.

David amused me.

It was quite true I did expect a letter from Mrs Stewart. Indeed, I was watching for it rather anxiously; because, not being able to make out if Uncle Sherbrook were or were not ill, I had written to Mrs Stewart, asking the question point-blank. As to Aunt Jane, I could not imagine what had happened to her, for I had never received but the one rigmarole from her—yet I had written to her three times, begging she would send me one line in return, just to say how my uncle was. I even asked her to say nothing else, thinking perhaps I might thus secure some kind of unmixed answer.

It was only as a last resource that I had written to Mrs Stewart. There was no one else I could write to, for I was certain none of the rectory people were allowed to see anything of my uncle.

Now, as I had not at all liked beginning a correspondence with the best of women, I had kept a pen in my hand for a day or two. While thus hesitating about writing my letter, it happened that one of the many "fellows" David met rushing through Paris was an officer in Gordon-Sherbrook's regiment. This Major Brown told David, Captain Stewart was dying. So David had said to me—

"Sophy, write instantly, and tell your admirable Catherine what Brown has told me. She might be enticed out to Malta."

"Not she! She is in too good quarters at home, and has been working too many years to get into them! Besides, David, you do not understand Gordon-

Sherbrook's lungs. They are the oddest pair of lungs ever invented! There are two sides to each of them—a good and a bad one; so that Mrs Stewart can take whatever view of their health best suits her little plans.”

David declared it was simply impossible for Gordon-Sherbrook any longer to have two sides to a lung. “Even his mother will have to allow the poor fellow has only one, and that a bad one. Why, Brown tells me poor Stewart has broken no end of blood-vessels; he says he is in the last stage of consumption, and that he has got three months' leave merely to die in. They dare not even move him from Malta, pestilential as the place is at this time of year.” And David said he could not believe Mrs Stewart knew the real state of the case.

“Well, then,” I replied, “if the poor young man really is dying, it might not be kind to tell his mother. She would tatt over his deathbed, and would cheerfully drive him into convulsions.”

But David said charity began at home, and that I ought to consider what a blessed riddance Mrs Stewart would be to my unfortunate uncle if she would only take herself off to Malta.

“It is she, Sophy, who is disagreeing with his constitution; for I have noticed the very tone of her voice annoys him.”

So I had dipped my pen into the ink, and had written to Mrs Stewart. I began with Uncle Sherbrook's health, as that was the real subject of my

letter, and I wanted it to be also the subject of her answer. I merely touched on Gordon-Sherbrook's lungs in passing from inquiries about Uncle Sherbrook to inquiries about Aunt Jane. I told Mrs Stewart exactly what Major Brown had said to David, for I knew she was not a woman whose maternal feelings I need dread to shock.

I got Mrs Stewart's answer one evening as we came out from the *table d'hôte*, just three days after David had proposed leaving Paris. It was he brought me the letter himself, and in a sort of triumph. "At last, Sophy!" cried he—"at last! here is the tiresome letter we have been waiting for." I perceived David had come to think he had waited on for the letter, and for no other reason. "When you have read it," he said, "you can tell me the news;" and he ran away to have a chat in the smoking-room. I laughed to see him run away so quickly, because I knew he feared I might read him my admirable Catherine's letter—or worse, make him read it to me; and he had already got such a sickening of my correspondence, that he used to declare I had killed the germ of curiosity within him by one judicious dose of Aunt Jane.

I laughed all the more, as I considered David had been scared away without due cause. I expected the very shortest of replies from Mrs Stewart, or I should not have felt so merry, for I heartily dislike Scriptural rigmaroles! It was only natural I should think the letter would be quite to the point, and with neither a *D.V.* nor *D.G.* beyond, because the best of women

never fancied it was necessary to sanctify her language when talking to me, as she did when speaking to Aunt Jane. I therefore expected her to write to me as she spoke. Imagine then my surprise on finding the envelope contained a large sheet of foreign note-paper, quite filled, and even partly crossed.

I perceive, said I, scanning the letter closely, that Gordon-Sherbrook has still two sides to each lung, and a *D.V.* and a *D.G.* and a text of Scripture to each side as well. When I came to read the maternal effusion, I found, instead of overstating the case, I had actually understated it. Gordon-Sherbook, I said, correcting myself, has not two, but six sides to each lung—a dozen between the two lungs; and a *D.V.* and a *D.G.* and a text of Scripture to each one of the twelve sides. At any rate, cried I, trying to draw some sort of conclusion from the rigmarole—at any rate, I gather that his mother declares the bad sides are corrected by the good, so she does not think him dying, and certainly will not go to Malta. The intention of not going to Malta is quite clear; in fact, strange to say, it was the only clear part of the whole effusion, and this was strange, because Mrs Stewart had not a confused mind. To my great annoyance, Uncle Sherbrook was forgotten altogether! Not a word about him from beginning to end.

Provoking woman! I exclaimed. However, my uncle cannot be ill. She would say so if he were. That certainty set me at ease.

I crumpled up the letter, and thought how much I disliked Mrs Stewart. I went to meet David, feeling I loved him the more, for not loving all the world besides.

The waiter, whom I sent into the smoking-room, brought me word David had never been there. Another *garçon* remembered seeing "monsieur" meet in the courtyard *ce gros monsieur anglais qui dîne parfois avec madame*, and then go out into the street with him. The waiter could not tell me the *gros monsieur's* name, but when I suggested "Coventry," he instantly replied, "*C'est bien ça, madame!*"

I expected no other reply; and yet the ready answer was a shock to me. I saw what had taken place. I dreaded what might happen. I went up to our little *salon* with a heart full of anxious foreboding, and I waited for David. I waited one hour. I waited two. I waited three—when I no longer feared, but knew what had occurred.

David did not come home till after midnight. I sent the maid to bed, and opened the door for him myself. When he saw me, he looked as if he would rather see any one on earth but me. He stood on the threshold, as if it required a courage he had not, to walk in.

"I will call for it early to-morrow, Scott, not now," whispered a voice in the dark, behind David, which I recognised as Mr Coventry's.

"No, no, Mr Coventry," said I, bitterly; "tell me what David has lost to you this night, and he shall

pay it now. Walk in, Mr Coventry, walk in to the light. I hope David has lost more money to you than you ever gained from him?" In saying these words, I fear contemptuous scorn marked my voice too strongly for good manners; but I despised, I almost hated the man who had tempted my husband to gamble. And it was through my poor David's too chivalrous sense of honour, thought I, that this man led him to play against his will.

I hardly blamed David, or if I did blame his weakness, when I looked at him I forgot to do so any longer. He had sunk upon a chair the very picture of distress, and, I might say, of shame. My heart yearned towards him, and my fast rising anger turned from him to fix entirely on Mr Coventry: there was an air of impertinent triumph about this man's whole look and manner, which I resented as an insult to David's misery.

I longed to be rid of Mr Coventry's presence. I begged David to name the sum—I knew he had lost; but David stared blankly before him, and gave no answer. It was the unblushing "Jack" himself who walked jauntily forward, and said the lost stakes amounted to £500.

We had nothing like that sum with us. So I stood for the moment bewildered and speechless, knowing we never could get the money without applying to Uncle Sherbrook, for he was still my agent, manager, banker—everything! and I hated being driven to betray my husband's weakness to him.

David gave me no help: he sat immovable, gazing vacantly.

“*Ne vous dérangez pas, madame!*” said Mr Coventry, politely; “*le jeu change*. To-morrow Scott may win back more than he has lost.” David looked up at these words. I saw a flash of hope in his awakening eye, and I shuddered with fear, and loathed the man who was tempting him. Mr Coventry seeing his advantage, pursued it, and gave many instances of men who, ruined one day, ruined others the next. He then addressed himself more particularly to me, and paid me a whole string of compliments, drawing nearer with each compliment. He ended by saying there was no hurry whatever about the payment of the “little debt;” he said he confided it to my honour, “*et l’honneur d’une dame ne fait jamais banqueroute*.” Having thus turned off his last sentence in French, he bowed like a fop on the stage, who intends kissing a lady’s hand. As he approached, I stepped back, and stood beside David.

When I moved, the light of the candles caught the large diamond ring I always wore on my right hand. I noticed my ring; I hesitated to part with it, for it was my mother’s, and I had worn it ever since her death. But the longing to get rid of David’s tempter grew stronger in my heart than any other feeling, so I held up my hand, and touching the ring, I cried, “Here is something worth more than £500!”

Mr Coventry knew the ring right well. He had

often observed the diamond, and spoken to me of its great value; I was sure he would take the ring for the debt. Yet again I hesitated.

David, seeing the diamond flash so near him, suddenly seized my upheld hand, exclaiming, "With this to stake, Sophy, I would win the £500 back again!" That demon, the gambler's hope, started like a bright light into his eye, and illumined all his face.

Terrified, I wrenched away my hand, and took off the ring without another qualm. I gave it to Mr Coventry, who accepted it eagerly enough.

"Scott," said he, "you must redeem this to-morrow. I only keep it *en attendant*, to please a lady." And then with some compliment to me about the hand which the diamond so long had graced, he bowed himself out of the room. He took quick leave.

"I will redeem it for you!" cried David, springing up; "I will redeem it, Sophy, or play till dooms-day!"

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The gambling fever slept itself away in the night, and, to my joy, David awoke another man next day. The glamour of excitement faded, and he saw things as they were, and himself as he had been; so he consented to leave Paris by a morning train, and left it with no bad grace! Indeed his good humour delighted and surprised me, because I saw he was really sorry for the scrape into which he had fallen, and I knew self-reproach makes most people, especi-

ally men, decidedly cranky. I could fancy Uncle Sherbrook biliously returning from vice to virtue. But David seemed to have the art of repenting without being cross. David repented agreeably. Never did a man repent so pleasantly as he!

It is true I never alluded to Mr Coventry, except once, and then only to say, "David, from the first I suspected that man dyed his moustache, but now I am sure of it!" I was thus careful not to improve the occasion, because much experience had taught me how irritating and generally useless are "words in season."

I excused David's fault by ascribing his easy yielding to that inborn sympathy of his—that sympathy which was what I most loved in him, that pleasant, unforbidding virtue, so different from the stiff, punctual ones I hitherto had known.

Though I became convinced it was this virtue, coupled with his over-sensitive feeling of honour, which had led him astray, I cannot now exactly remember how I arrived at this conclusion. I find our pleasant journey from Paris has left no trace of ponderous reasoning in my mind; indeed, at this distance of time, my memory alone recalls to me that David's voice was in my heart those happy days, and he beside me.

Never had he been kinder, never so kind before! and in travelling there are many little ways of showing thoughtful affection. David's tenderness (I can call it by no other name) filled me with a

passion of delight. The moving heated blood of joy coursed through my heart, and warmed my very brain, till I seemed to become a creature of enchanting, quick intelligence, as if I had really caught the inspiration of David's wit; for never had I known David more fascinating in his wit! But I will not try to give any idea of it. True to the rule I have all along laid down for myself, I refuse, and ever will refuse, to desecrate his witty sayings by my cold, pointless repetition. I feel it is only their old bones I could preserve, and I abhor old bones! What likeness is there between a hateful skull and the face whose living smile once filled us with great joy? I detest the dead wit, because I intensely loved the living.

I was filled with gratitude towards David when I saw he laid himself out to be fascinating and delightful to me; for till now I had been accustomed to give and receive nothing in return.

The pleasant companion of my maiden dreams, idealised by my imagination, was not more charming than the real David proved to me; and too often (how well I knew it!) reality is but the ruthless destroyer of bright illusion. So for once in my life, instead of awaking to cruel disappointment, I awoke to the full satisfaction of the dreamer who rises from imaginary bliss to feel real, lively joy. I felt at last there was satisfaction to be found in life, and I was happy!

I actually caught myself wishing David might get into a scrape every six months, so as to give me con-

tinually the pleasure of his agreeable repentance. Luckily I had enough common-sense left to prevent my expressing this immoral sentiment aloud—but only just enough.

The three days we spent travelling from Paris to Havre were the happiest in my whole life, because David, and the ideal I had made of him and of his love, were one.

The remembrance of satisfaction and fulfilled joy is like a bright light, casting all other recollections of our journey into shade. The churches in Rouen have jumbled their naves together, and St Ouen is not as clear to my eye as it should be.

We went by water from Rouen to Havre. The day we passed on the river has left an impression of heavenly beauty on my mind. The weather, I know, was fine, but I have since heard people say the Seine has no scenery to boast of; so perhaps it was the rapture of my own soul, blending with the sunshine around me, which transfigured the flowing river to my sight.

We went down with the stream, and I liked to feel the river carry us onwards to the open sea—the moving water seemed to flow like the unchecked passion of my heart, and there was sympathy between its motion and my mood.

The sun had begun to set when we opened the mouth of the Seine and first saw the sea beyond: the sea was like boundless light before us, and the waves like moving, living joy upheaved from an un-

fathomed depth. There was satisfaction in the boundless light and boundless sea, stretching like an eternity of joy beyond the present hour.

We only remained two nights at Havre, starting thence for Southampton. We were bound for Scotland, but intended staying in London on our way. I cannot help thinking that perhaps one reason why David had suffered himself to be carried off from Paris so good-humouredly, was that we had received an invitation to join a shooting-party in Scotland. David's Scotch friend had asked me as well as my husband, and had written pressing David to come, and telling him he would lose all his autumn shooting if he indulged in too long a honeymoon. So I had proposed, much to David's delight, that we should go to Scotland, and not go to those distant parts of the earth where a man has no grouse to kill if he is bored, but only his wife or himself.

When in the very act of leaving Paris, I wrote to Aunt Jane saying we had started northwards, and would stop a day in London, and proposing to run down and see her and my uncle at Sherbrook Hall, and lunch with them if convenient. I naturally expected to find an answer awaiting me in Montagu Square, instead of which I only found a pack of advertising circulars. I opened a dozen, and ten of them recommended me to lay in a store of some particular kind of brandy, and of some remarkably pure sherry. All the circulars were directed to me, with the exception of one very black-bordered envelope

addressed to my husband—"Somebody wanting to bury you, Davie!" cried I, gaily.

"Open it," said David, tossing the letter back to me; "a bargain is more tempting to a woman than a man! So tell me if you think the cheap funeral worth dying for!"

I broke the big black seal. There was no printed circular inside, but a letter—it was from Mr Buggle to David. I seemed to read and understand it in one glance. It fell from my shaking hand—Uncle Sherbrook was dead! Mr Buggle hoped David would be in time for the funeral.

CHAPTER III.

THAT all men must die is the one fact which nobody disputes. It is the veriest commonplace. We hear of death from our earliest childhood. If ever there was a word we should understand, it is that one! Its meaning should instantly be visible to our imagination, so that on hearing it we should be able to realise that absence from the well-known scene, just as if our heart had felt the empty place, and our eyes had really seen it.

Yet such is the force of habit, that, like unreasoning creatures, we look for the dead where we have been accustomed to see the living. Till the new habit is formed within us, we expect to see what we know we cannot see, while the sights we should expect startle and shock us.

When David and I drove along the front avenue hastening to Uncle Sherbrook's funeral, had I seen my uncle walking sedately in the highest and driest bit of the road, I should have forgotten I did not expect again to behold the familiar figure. It actually seemed strange to me not to see him, while the hearse

I expected to see startled me as if it were a sudden, a horrid surprise. "We are late for the funeral. All is over, Sophy," said David, pointing to the hearse which stood, dismantled of its feathers, by the yard gate. "All is over!" I repeated; for I saw the mutes sitting on the top of the hearse with their legs hanging down against the side: they were holding on to the pegs where the plumes had been, and were joking in jolly style. "Odious brutes!" muttered David. "They never knew him, David," said I; yet the sight of these hardened men grieved and sickened me.

The sound of our carriage-wheels upon the gravel had announced our arrival. We found the porch door wide open, and some one awaiting us outside. I looked, and this man in deepest black was Rigardy-Wrenstone!

My cousin thrust his head through the carriage window before the horse had stopped. "The ceremony is over," said he in a low whisper; "I personally superintended the arrangements, and saw the right people were invited. Hartmoor came down from town last night, and we put him up at the Abbey. Moultrie and half the county are here. Offaway sent his carriage, and so did Tankney, for I told Fred his father might send it if he liked." The whisper sank still lower—"I took care everything was done in a proper manner. I considered James Sherbrook ought to read the service, so I acted as chief mourner myself. I had Hartmoor at one side and Moultrie at the other.

I found Hartmoor was a near connection through his mother."

"Chief mourner!" I exclaimed, and felt as if I were in a most unreal dream. I stared at Denis, and noticed he had a large black silk scarf over one shoulder, and I saw his countenance did not contradict his words—he wore an air of grave and decorous sadness. He might have been my uncle's own son! I was bewildered; and I remember I turned to David, hoping for some explanation of the puzzle, but read nothing in my husband's face except the same perplexity I felt in my own mind.

! | "Chief mourner?" said I to David; "he was chief mourner!" Our driver had not brought the fly close enough to the door-step, so Denis was telling him to bring it nearer, yet my cousin did not raise his voice—he whispered decorously to the coachman.

He helped me to alight and gave me his arm, just as my uncle might have done on his own door-step were he at home and not dead. I was astonished to feel myself entering Uncle Sherbrook's house leaning upon Rigardy-Wrenstone's arm. The strangeness of this circumstance made me understand there was indeed some great change in the old house. It almost forced me to realise that my uncle would not come out of the study and meet me in the hall—almost, but not quite! So hard is it, amidst objects familiar to us from childhood and still unaltered, to grasp the new belief that what has been our whole life long is no more now.

The study-door opened. I started! and for one short moment thought to see the well-known face.

It was Mr Buggle who had opened the door. When the attorney first caught sight of me, his countenance changed—a look of malignant joy crossed his face. It came one instant, and was subdued the next. So rapidly and entirely did the sudden expression disappear that I barely saw it, for perceiving it, I looked for it, and it was gone—Mr Buggle wore his usual bland, imperturbable mask again. At a distance, when backed by his long white hair, its benevolence looked imposing; but closely examined, there was a hard cunning in the face which fixed the bland lines, and prevented mobile change, as if the substance underneath were too hard to move or to be moved. When by accident, once in a way, a new expression crossed his face, it was a surprise: you remarked it, and could not easily forget it.

Mr Buggle walked forwards and shook hands with me: it was the first time he had ever done so, as his manner was generally one of bowing subservience. I remember feeling a little surprised, when he did take my hand, that he did not keep it a moment in his, and pressing it, like a saint whose touch is a blessing, did not make some remark on the shortness of life and the irreparable loss I had sustained. But instead of softly breathing some word of edifying consolation, Mr Buggle spoke out loudly, indeed in a louder tone than usual. “This is the late Mr Sherbrook’s will,” he said to me, and touched with one hand the parch-

ment roll he held in the other—"Mrs Scott, if you and these gentlemen will follow me into the dining-room, I shall proceed immediately to read the will."

Rigardy-Wrenstone opposed my joining the party already assembled in the dining-room. A short discussion ensued been him and Mr Buggle. My cousin's hushed tones were nearly inaudible to my ear, but I heard all Mr Buggle said. The attorney said it was not unusual for ladies to be present on these occasions, and declared no one would expect to see me in mourning, the reason of my late appearance being fully known. "This is a matter," said Mr Buggle, "in which Mrs Scott may surely be allowed entirely to consult her own wishes. Not that I imagine this document will be found to contain any disposition of property unexpected by Mrs Scott. I conceive Mrs Scott to be as fully acquainted with the late lamented Mr Sherbrook's testamentary intentions as I am. Madam," he added, turning to me, "I am aware you had frequent discussions with Mr Sherbrook upon the subject of his will—discussions of an exciting character. Mr Sherbrook was not a man to be easily led."

I barely grasped what Mr Buggle was saying to me. It is David who has since recalled the exact words to my memory. At the time, I only felt in a confused kind of way, from the attorney's tone and manner, that he meant something I did not quite understand, and that altogether he was not the man I had hitherto known. I again thought I was living in a dream,

where nothing or nobody seemed right or natural. This paralysis of mind was partly due to the horror I had conceived of my first meeting with Aunt Jane. This cowardice (I can call it by no other name) had seized me from the moment I read the fatal letter in Montagu Square. I intensely dreaded my aunt's boisterous grief. I am a selfish coward. I know I am, for when I am moved myself, I shrink from the sight of tears and lamentation as from actual physical pain.

We had reached the foot of the staircase—another moment, and I should be in Aunt Jane's presence. I eagerly seized the delay Mr Buggle offered me, and followed him into the dining-room almost gladly, so great was my cowardly relief at even a few minutes' respite from the pain I feared.

There were a good many gentlemen in the room, but no lady—I instantly perceived Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart's absence. The Rector was there: he rose and gave me his own chair, and looked at me kindly with a look which told me his heart had been touched this day. I found old Sir John Moultrie seated next me: he, too, had a kind and softened air; but I saw at a glance, by the other solemnly inquisitive faces around me, that no one else had felt real sorrow this forenoon beside the open grave. I was nervously glad to see no tears and hear no sobs.

The changed aspect of the room where my uncle used to perform in stately fashion the daily ceremony of three punctual meals, was a kind of shock to me,

and yet the queer thought struck me how pleased Uncle Sherbrook would be could he but come himself and read his own will to this solemn assembly. I smiled, for I could see him and hear the very tone of voice in which I knew he would read that perfect will, that masterpiece of sound judgment and of law ! The vision was so true to his nature, that I think I believed in it, for the attorney's voice fell like flat disappointment on my heart—it roughly tore away my last illusion. There was something unmistakably real in hearing Mr Buggle read my uncle's will amidst profound silence. This very silence told of death—it was the silence of men who hold their breath in awe.

Except the attorney and the Rector, all present were gentlemen, more or less, of fortune. To such there is a fearful solemnity in the fact that we take nothing away with us when we die, but are robbed as if by a thief at the last hour. Just at the very time we might like to find some comfort in our wealth, our house and good estates are taken from us, and we go like a wretched, nameless beggar into the grave. The will of a man leaving to others lands and money, which a few days since he held tightly in his own grasp, forces this truth upon us.

The still, deep, breathless silence made the one voice sound intensely clear. There could be no delusion, no mistake in the words spoken by that hard, unmoved tone. I felt it would proclaim, like unimpassioned justice, James Sherbrook's right to be my uncle's heir.

I heard the well-remembered, "I, Edward Brewen Stewart Sherbrook of Sherbrook Hall, in the county of Dullshire, Esquire, give, devise, and bequeath;" and I expected immediately to hear James Sherbrook's name. I sprang to my feet with a cry, for instead of the Rector's name, I heard the name of Gordon-Sherbrook Stewart!

The poor Rector stood beside me, and I saw him turn deadly pale, and then redden in shame at having betrayed emotion. Instinctively I laid my hand upon his shoulder, as if I would point him out to all the world as my uncle's rightful heir.

Yet I did not for one moment doubt my ears. Gordon-Sherbrook's name came to me more like a revelation than a surprise. I was awakened by it instantaneously to see the admirable Catherine's deep intrigue. I believed in the cruel robbery as if I had foreseen it, because I believed in Mrs Stewart's grasping, unrelenting cruelty, with an undoubting soul. I recognised this will to be her handiwork.

I paid breathless attention; because it seemed to me that Sherbrook Hall went straight to Captain Stewart, and did not go to Aunt Jane for life. I wondered if poor Aunt Jane were also left a penniless outcast! Her name was mentioned once; she was to have the interest of £10,000. There were legacies to servants, to Mr Buggle as executor, but no legacy to Aunt Jane! and, strange enough, none to Mrs Stewart. I listened intently, for I remembered that in the will my uncle had read me, Aunt Jane had been left resid-

uary legatee. I listened in vain. I heard her name no more. It was not she, but Gordon-Sherbrook, who was now left residuary legatee.

Mr Buggle stopped reading.

There was a moment's intenser silence than before, and then a rising whisper.

"This is not my uncle's will!" I cried.

The awaking sound was hushed, and my trembling voice echoed in the death-like silence which again had fallen around me. I felt the silence like a pain: it would have choked me had I not known the moment now within my grasp would never return to me, and therefore made one great effort to speak before it was too late.

"Uncle Sherbrook read me his own will," I said, "and by it the Rector was his heir. My uncle left this house and place to Aunt Jane for life, and he left her money to keep them up, and made her residuary legatee besides." I spoke quickly, fearing I never should get time to tell the whole truth. I saw Mr Buggle crossing the room hurriedly towards me, ~~and~~ S ~~then~~ S hastening, as I thought, to silence me. Before I had finished speaking, Mr Buggle and I stood face to face. He kept his usual countenance unmoved, but there was suppressed fury in his eye.

"It is easily conceived," said he, addressing himself to the curious crowd surrounding us—"it is easily conceived," he said, in a loud clear voice, "that a will might not give entire satisfaction to a lady whose name is not mentioned in it."

I grasped the meaning of these words, and felt it to be an insult.

"My name, sir," said I, proudly, "was not mentioned in my uncle's former will."

"I, madam," retorted Mr Buggle, "can prove the contrary, Mr Sherbrook himself having informed me of the fact."

"He is right; your name was there. Don't have a row with that rascally attorney, Sophy. You will get the worst of it now," whispered David in one ear; while Sir John Moultrie whispered in the other, "Wait till the old will is found, Mrs Scott, or that clever knave will put you at the wrong side of the law, and make you ruin poor James Sherbrook's case."

I was silenced by David's words. "He is right; your name was there," had strangled me. I saw a canny, unbelieving smile on the many strange faces surrounding me, and I felt the present moment had passed into Mr Buggle's hands, and was no longer in my own.

I was abashed. I was bewildered, too, and I left the room without another word. Rigardy-Wrenstone, as master of the ceremonies, offered me his arm, but I preferred to go and meet Aunt Jane alone.

I went quickly. I did not dare to stop and think. I should have dreaded to collect my senses. My uncle's incomprehensible will, and the scene I had just borne part in, had fairly scattered them. The dream-like feeling that all I saw and heard must be unreal, had once more taken possession of me. I no longer

understood the present hour, so its pain was stilled to me.

I had my hand upon the door of Aunt Jane's room ; a scream startled me, and Harriet Snipkins darted out of my uncle's dressing-room, exclaiming, "Lor', Miss Sophy ! his it you ? How you did frighten me, to be sure !" The girl seized my hand, and said in a scared undertone, "The master died in there, and the room has never been cleaned hout since. Miss Snipkins says Mrs Helizabeth must do hit hout to-morrow, but Mrs Helizabeth his sadly hafeered, halthrough Miss Snipkins says it was nothing hinfectious killed the poor master, but just honly mere common pralersis, which nobody hever took, hexcept hof themselves. But, you see, Miss Sophy, Mrs Helizabeth she does not like to be the first person to go in there since the death. She says the first person has goes in will die before the year's hout, and she counts the hundertaker's men has nobody, for she says hundertakers his not hany of the family. She won't credit me when I tell her Mrs Stewart has been hin there hopening hof drawers, and ha-taking hout of papers, and ha-reading letters, and long before hever the body was carried away. I saw her hexact likeness through the keyhole of the dressing-room, for, hearing a sound, I thought it might be a ghost prowling habout like a body-snatcher, which, they say, some hof them spirits his. But, Lor' ! Mrs Helizabeth, she will huphold it was a real ghost I saw, and Miss Snipkins backs her hup, and swears to it, and threatens to give me notice, and have me turned

right hout of the 'ouse if I dare tell hany one it was Mrs Stewart, so I honly tell you in confidence, Miss Sophy ; I beg pardon, ma'am, I meant to say Mrs Scott, ma'am."

The girl looked round. Her eyes grew bigger, and she whispered, "I've been looking hin hagain, ma'am. There is no one there, so maybe hit's gone to the churchyard, for if hit was not Mrs Stewart"—she trembled from head to foot—"hit was no hother living woman!"

She shook and stared as if frightened out of her very wits.

"Harriet, it may have been my aunt you saw," said I.

"Oh Lor'!" she screamed ; "Lor', ma'am ! hit was not poor Mrs Sherbrook ! Bless her, poor lady, she's never has much has crossed this 'ere lobby since the day the master died. She has slept in that 'ere room of yours, Miss Sophy, for you and Mr Scott are to be in the red room, ma'am, and she's stayed in there hall by herself, poor lady, and nobody has 'ardly hever gone nigh her, for Mrs Stewart has been that busy hordering hof heverybody and heverything, and taking hof what she calls a hinventory in betimes, and Miss Snipkins has been ha taking hof that hinventory too, so the poor mistress 'as been crying and stringing hof her jet necklaces, and hof yours too, ma'am, from morn-ing till night, with double helastic. She says 'one helastic won't hold them jet-beads. Her happetite's been bad, Miss Sophy, which Miss Hemma says is

most uncommon for her ; and halthough she's got her mourning now quite complete, and put it hon, cap and hall, she heats none the better. Perhaps, miss, you could make her heat more if you just coaxed her a bit, for she likes to be coaxed to heat, halthough she takes to crying, and says *no*, but I coaxed her to heat a hegg, and she hate it."

"You say she is in my old room, Harriet?" said I, and I went in there.

Aunt Jane had her back to the door. She stood by the window holding up to the light a big jet cross of mine, which she was threading to a black bead necklace. She was dressed in the deepest weeds, and her ringlets were pushed back under a widow's cap; the absence of the familiar curls made a great change in her appearance. Her face was pale, and her eyes were very red, and she had a wretched, irritable, scared sort of look.

I had entered the room softly, and she had not heard my step. She was talking to herself, and shaking her head. The sight of her nervous, excited misery touched me.

When I got about half-way across the room she heard me coming, and put down the jet necklace, and turning towards me with outstretched arms, exclaimed, "Oh, Catherine! Catherine!" For a full minute she seemed unable to believe that I was myself. When at length she realised it was Sophy, and not Catherine, whom she had all but embraced, her conduct was amazing and unintelligible. She pushed me from her,

and burst into a wail of tears, crying, "Go away, Sophy! go away! never come near me again; I can't bear to see you. Edward never asked for any one but you." She threw herself upon the sofa, and hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Aunt Jane, don't cry," said I, soothingly; "don't cry, my dear."

I thought her poor senses had quite left her. Kneeling before her, I gently tried to take her hands in mine and wipe away her tears, as I should a weeping child's. At first she kept her two hands tightly clasped across her eyes; then unclasping them, as if in a fit of sudden passion, she struck me on the forehead, I think unintentionally; but seeing she had hit me, she only said querulously, "Why do you come so near? go away! go away, Sophy! I tell you I don't want to see you any more." And again she covered her face with her hands, and sobbed hysterically, but talked between each sob. I thought it better to let her talk on without remark or interruption. "He was always asking for you" (a sob). "I don't know why he cared for you" (a sob). "Never liked your marrying" (a sob); "selfish" (a sob), "ungrateful" (a sob and a pause, but not a long one). "Edward never asked for any one but you, never! never! and at the last . . ." The remembrance of that awful time when life was ebbing into death almost sobered my aunt. She repeated in a solemn whisper, "At the last he did not know me or anybody, and he thought my hand was yours, and he said good-bye to you, Sophy, and

he did not say good-bye to me. Go away! go away, Sophy! I can't bear to see you!" and my poor aunt wept again as if her heart would break, but I felt hardened towards her. I rose from my knees.

"He thought your hand was mine. He thought I stood beside him!" I said, and tears of passionate sorrow started to my eyes. "Oh, Aunt Jane! Aunt Jane!" I exclaimed, in bitter, angry grief, "why was I not told that he was dying till he was dead?"

My anger startled Aunt Jane and stayed the flow of her tears. She sat up and wailed out in the querulous tone habitual to her—"I am always in the wrong, always! If I write, I am in the wrong, and Catherine thinks so; and if I don't write, I am in the wrong, and you think so, and Catherine told me not to write, for she said you would be in the way, and be getting round your uncle, and be taking my proper place, and be turning me out, and . . ."

"You have been cruelly selfish!" I cried, passionately,—*"wickedly selfish! and never can I forgive you!"*

My poor aunt let fall her handkerchief, as if she were too much bewildered to cry, and commenced the despairing wail again. "You won't forgive me! and Catherine won't forgive me! and Snipkins won't forgive me! and I am sure James Sherbrook won't forgive me either! though I have never done anything, and I have tried to please everybody, and I prayed the Lord might direct me to choose Edward's heir, and Catherine prayed too, and it was when Catherine

was praying that she first thought of Gordon-Sherbrook—she had never thought of him before, and I am sure it was the Almighty put the idea into her head, because poor James Sherbrook is so very High Church, and all the fortune might go to Cardinal Manning and the Jesuits, and Gordon-Sherbrook's name came into my head at the same time it came into Catherine's, and Catherine says his name was a direct answer to our joint prayers, but poor, dear Edward, he was so queer! Oh, so queer! so queer! He never would see Catherine again after he made his last will; because, he said, he did not want to change his will till he got better, and that Catherine would tease him, and he was sure he had made some mistake in his new will, and that somebody was forgotten in it, only he did not know who it was, and sometimes he thought it was you, Sophy, and sometimes he thought it was James Sherbrook. Poor dear Edward! he got what Dr Daly would call his second stroke, the very next day after he made his will, but it was not really a stroke at all, Sophy, only a very bad sort of jaundice, very bad indeed! much worse than he had ever had before! And when he made his new will he hated Catherine to come into the room, and he would not let Snipkins come in, and he said he did not want to be worried any more, but that when he got well he would change his will again, and if you had come, Sophy, I am quite sure Edward would have hated you too the very instant he saw you, because he really and truly hated every one except me, and then you would have

thought it was all my fault! And it was not my fault at all! though I know every one thinks it was! and Snipkins sends Harriet to wait upon me, and Snipkins is cross when she does come, and says she has not time to dress me in the morning, and Catherine never comes near me, Sophy, never, never!" The tears rolled down Aunt Jane's cheeks. "I thought now poor dear Edward was gone, Catherine would be kind to me, and read me the Bible, and some of the tracts in her hand-bag, and ask me to eat when I am not hungry! And I suppose, Sophy, you will do just the same, and leave me all by myself to think over and over again that Edward never said good-bye to me!" Aunt Jane's voice was lost in a long sob.

But I did not relent towards her or try to comfort her. I said with cold severity, "He was dead before you told me he was dying, yet he was asking for me always. You say he was."

Aunt Jane began her wail, her tiresome wail again, but I did not know what she was saying. I listened to her no more, and gave no answer when she stopped for one.

I stood away from her. My thoughts were bent in silent anguish upon the awful meaning I gathered from her rambling words — a death-bed worried by will-makers; a dying man dreading his tormentors, and shrinking from them with impotent hatred!

Oh, what a fearful sight was this I saw revealed to me! I felt as if the curtain of a dark dungeon had been drawn aside, and I had seen my uncle in the

hands of torturers ; and with no one to comfort him but one poor, dismayed, bewildered, jealous soul, the helpless tool of those cruel wretches who had forced a good and upright man to do a great wrong when his strength and clear mind were failing him. It is a cursed thing to make an honourable man belie a just life, and sully it on his death-bed by an unjust will ! No cruelty is more devilish than this !

I noticed Aunt Jane had said my uncle got another stroke the day after he made his will. I could well imagine the agitation which had killed him. I could conceive the remorse he felt at being forced to do a wrong which he could not clearly understand and undo, and yet knew to be a wrong.

Then I could imagine, too, the half-paralysed consciousness of those last days when my poor uncle still remembered I should love him as a daughter and be with him, and yet asked for me and asked in vain ! I could not bear the grief of such a thought.

“ Aunt Jane,” said I, suddenly breaking in upon the never-ending wail—“ Aunt Jane, I hate you for your mean jealousy ! You have thrust it like a crime between the dying man and me ! I cannot forgive you. I hate you for this crime ! ” She screamed and rushed towards me, but I left her abruptly.

Anger drove all pity from my heart, and filled it with burning indignation. Never in my whole life had I been so angry ! I was beside myself with passion—a passion all the more intense because its agony was

powerless: it could not bring back the dead to life; it could not let me say the few, few words to him who had been like a father to me, which would explain my cruel absence, my callous silence. Impotent rage quite maddened me. I swore to punish Aunt Jane, to be revenged upon her, to make her feel that same pain of abandoned neglect which she had made Uncle Sherbrook feel on his death-bed.

So totally engrossed was I by my own thoughts, that instead of going into the red room which I knew had been prepared for me, I walked straight into the green one. A scream from Snipkins brought me to my senses, and Mrs Stewart's presence told me where I was.

The admirable Catherine sat at a small writing-table by the bedside. She had a pen in her right hand, and in the left she held the big embossed silver teapot with the bear's head spout—the teapot which Aunt Jane so loved and admired, and which she used every day of her life.

The whole bed was covered with plate. I saw the silver branch and smaller candlesticks, the big and little salvers, and the two tankards, and the old ancestral punch-bowl, besides the four dancing-bear muffineers, other salt-cellars, and spoons and forks innumerable.

I do not think my unexpected, inopportune appearance disconcerted Mrs Stewart in the very slightest degree—at least she betrayed neither annoyance nor embarrassment. Snipkins, on the contrary, looked

like a thief caught in the act, and attracted my attention to the linen she was sorting by covering a pile of tablecloths with her dress and apron.

“Oh! is it you, Sophy? How do you do?” said Mrs Stewart, and she gave me a nod. “In a moment!” she added, not stirring, but waiting first to finish what she was writing when I entered. While she wrote she seemed to be weighing the silver teapot in her left hand, and she looked at it anxiously, covetously, as if she wished it to be even heavier and more valuable than it was. She knitted her brows and had the air of a person whose whole heart and mind are absorbed in fixed attention. She turned the teapot upside down, and curiously examined the silver mark. A kind of smile played round her thin, greedy lips.

I could not bear to look at her! To my eye, she was like some lean and hungry carrion crow intent upon the first morsels of its horrid feast. I turned on my heel and left the room more quickly than I had entered it.

Dreading lest the hateful woman might come after me, I ran into the red room and locked the door.

She knew the poor dead man! cried I, weeping hot tears; and she ate of his bread, and lived in his house, and flattered him; and he was only buried to-day! Only to-day! The grass has not grown over his coffin, and even strangers as they pass the churchyard will ask who lies in the fresh, brown grave; yet she has already forgotten his kindness and his death! I remembered the jovial mutes joking on the hearse,

but this heartless woman, this camp-follower, filled me with far deeper disgust than they. To me she was like one of those greedy sutlers we read of in dark tales of war, who follow death with joy.

The admirable Catherine was so pleasantly occupied that she left me to myself. We did not meet until dinner-time. Dinner was an hour later than was usual at Sherbrook Hall. David and I finding no one in the drawing-room, at length went into the dining-room. Mrs Stewart was already there. She shook hands with David, and would have shaken hands with me, but I shrunk from her touch, saying, "We met before."

She had a perfectly unembarrassed though somewhat preoccupied air ; but there was not an atom of sadness or hypocrisy about her—she seemed impatient at being kept waiting for dinner, like a person who has a great deal of business to do. "Mrs Sherbrook told me she would dine with us to-night, but she is not here, so we had better sit down without her. Dinner is late enough as it is." Thus saying, the admirable Catherine coolly took her place at the head of the table. Seeing we were in no hurry to follow her example, she said—"Who knows when she will come? I left her an hour ago with Mr Buggle, and he was trying to make her understand the provisions of Mr Sherbrook's will. I tried first, but found her mind was all at sixes and sevens, and she would pretend to believe that everything belongs to her! So I handed her over to Mr Buggle, but even he won't be

able to make short work of her nonsense. We find she has got a whole set of securities and shares she has no right to, and only main force will make her give them up."

"What sort of securities?" asked David, shortly, with the look of a man who suddenly suspects there is something wrong. "I will inquire about these shares and these securities, Mrs Stewart." While David was speaking, George threw the doors open from the outside, and Aunt Jane came in.

My heart smote me when I saw the poor, bewildered thing! David went up to her and greeted her kindly: she looked at him in a distracted manner, and said nothing, and did not cry.

Mrs Stewart made a faint, the faintest possible attempt at rising from her chair. "You need not move, Catherine," said Aunt Jane, in a hoarse voice; "Mr Buggle says this is not my house any longer."

Yet Aunt Jane lingered beside the place she was accustomed to consider her own. Mrs Stewart opened her napkin. "Very well!" she exclaimed, "if you won't sit here, I will. Perhaps, indeed," she added, "it may help you to realise things are changed, and that would be a real blessing to us all! George, uncover the soup!"

No one but a woman can torment a woman, thought I; and I felt that to make a person like Aunt Jane thus abdicate her seat of honour was the very refinement of cruelty.

"George," I said severely, to the butler, who was

obeying Mrs Stewart's orders, "wait until your mistress is seated." I well knew how much my aunt prized small acts of respectful etiquette.

Dear David was moved to sympathy by poor Aunt Jane's evident humiliation. He took her hand and led her gently to Uncle Sherbrook's vacant chair. Aunt Jane drew back. "Edward's seat!" said she, in an awestruck whisper,—“no one must take Edward's chair.”

And she sat down at one side of the table and gazed at the empty place, as if by much looking her tearless eyes could fill it. It was strange she did not cry! Her unwonted calmness almost frightened me; it touched me more than tears. She glanced from my uncle's usual place to her own accustomed one, and then, having once turned her eyes that way, she seemed unable to remove them.

The admirable Catherine was giving herself a second helping of soup, and Aunt Jane stared at her as if fascinated by some strange sight. At last Mrs Stewart became aware of the unchanging gaze. She looked up, and said sharply, "I wish you would not stare so, Mrs Sherbrook. It is quite unpleasant."

"Oh, Catherine! Catherine!" cried Aunt Jane, "I am looking to see if it is really, really and truly you, for I can't believe what I see. I can't believe anything! and I hope I am not getting silly, because I am afraid Mr Buggle thinks I am, and he used to think me very clever! but I cannot understand anything now! for poor dear Edward never, never told

me that everybody and everything would change when he was dead and gone away." Her troubled voice was piteous to hear. Her wrinkled, distressed face pained me, and I noticed a loose and fallen look about her under jaw which I did not remember having seen before. I was suddenly filled with a great compassion for her; I thought I had been cruel to her; my anger melted, and I repented of its violence.

Pity is the strongest passion in our heart next to love, and, like love, it overcomes us unawares, and moves our firmest resolve: rushing as a sudden flood upon the heart, it carries angry grievances, like old landmarks, far away.

"Aunt Jane," said I, softly; I sat next to her,—*"do try and eat. Eat a little, my dear, just a little, to please me!"* The sound of my voice coaxing her as she loved to be coaxed had a strange effect upon her nerves; she bent her head and wept aloud.

"Oh, Sophy!" she sobbed, "Mr Buggle says you hate me because of poor dear Edward's will. I told him you hated me, and he said that was the reason. But oh, Sophy! it is not my fault! It is not my fault! It is Mr Buggle's own fault, for he did not do what Edward told him! Edward told him to make me residuary legatee, and Mr Buggle did not do it, and there is some mistake in Edward's will!" The admirable Catherine stopped eating as if shot by a gun. She tried in all haste to silence Aunt Jane, but in vain. I think my aunt's own sobs deafened her. "Edward told Mr Buggle," continued my weeping aunt, "to

make me residuary legatee, and Mr Buggle says he did . . .”

“Mrs Sherbrook!” interrupted Mrs Stewart, but without effect.

“Mr Buggle says he did, and I know what residuary legatee means, because Edward always explained it to me, and he always made me residuary legatee in all his wills, because there is some mistake about my marriage settlements, so Edward always made me residuary legatee, always in all his wills . . .”

“Mrs Sherbrook!”

“Always in all his wills! and Mr Buggle says he would have let Edward leave me a great deal more if he had known there were £45,000 of shares in the brown tin box, but he knew nothing about them, because Edward never told him, Edward never let Mr Buggle help him to make any of his wills till he was dying, and Edward told Mr Buggle what was in the last will Edward and I had made, and he told him Sophy’s name was in it, and I heard him, and Mr Buggle took it away from Edward and burnt it, and Edward wanted to get out of bed and save it, but he could not move, and it was burnt before I could find the tongs. . . .” Aunt Jane grew more and more excited, and more impossible to interrupt. “Edward did not like his new will at all!” she cried—“not at all! and he went on repeating he was sure there was some mistake in it, something wrong about James Sherbrook; and when I told him Gordon-Sherbrook was ~~now~~ his heir, because James

was so high Church, Edward could not understand me. He was so queer ! oh, so queer ! and always thinking of Sophy, and saying he had not heard Sophy's name in his will, and making me promise over and over again to leave Sophy at least £30,000 when I die, because I was residuary legatee, and would get all the shares in the brown tin box. But Mr Buggle has not done what Edward told him ! Mr Buggle has not made me residuary legatee." Aunt Jane was forced to take breath.

A look of great fear crossed Mrs Stewart's face : I saw her cast a furtive glance at David and the servants. She called my aunt to order in the severest and most penetrating rasp of her voice. Aunt Jane could not help hearing her. "Mrs Sherbrook !" she called out, "take care what you are saying ! an action for libel would lie against you."

An action for libel was at all times the most awful of vague terrors to Aunt Jane. Sheer fright calmed her sobs. She threw up her hands, gaped her mouth, and opened her eyes in horrified alarm. "What have I said wrong ?" she asked ; "oh, don't tell Mr Buggle, Catherine ! don't tell him if I have said anything wrong, for I don't want to have a lawsuit, and that was why Edward was always making his will, so that everything might be quite clear and right when he died, and really, really I only say what is quite true . . ."

"Mrs Sherbrook . . ."

"Quite true, but nobody will believe me now, though

you ought to believe me, Catherine; indeed, indeed you ought! even if you are angry with me, because it was you, Catherine, who found the share-book in the brown tin box, in my own wardrobe, where Edward had made me hide it that night when he was so feverish; poor dear Edward told me never, never to give it to Mr Buggle, for he thought Mr Buggle had made a mistake in his will, and Snipkins heard him, and I promised Edward I would not give it to any one. I promised him on his death-bed! but Mr Buggle has made me give him everything, though poor dear Edward told me not! he told me not!" and she repeated, "he told me not!" several times, but with dry eyes, and in a terrified, tearless voice. Really I feared she might be losing the little remains of her reason; for I declare she looked half mad — like a distracted creature who had committed some great crime, and knew it, but did not know how or why.

Aunt Jane stopped repeating "he told me not!" and then there was dead silence in the room. David was all eyes and ears; the servants stood still and listened. Yet Mrs Stewart was speechless; she seemed taken aback. But it was only for a moment she thus lost her presence of mind. That short moment passed, and the admirable Catherine, as if by a miracle, was again in full possession of her very remarkable faculties. With supple tact, in the twinkling of an eye, she appeared to have changed her nature, and almost did change her rasping voice.

"Poor dear Mrs Sherbrook!" she cried, rising from

table, and hastening to Aunt Jane's side,—“ poor dear Mrs Sherbrook ! no wonder you are distracted, and can understand nothing after all you have gone through ! After that dreadful week, when poor Mr Sherbrook did not know what he was saying or doing.”

“ Indeed, indeed, Catherine,” exclaimed Aunt Jane, “ it was a dreadful time ! dreadful ! and poor dear Edward knew nobody ! He thought I was Sophy, and said good-bye to her, and never said good-bye to me. Edward never said good-bye to me ! ” And Aunt Jane's tearful sorrow was fresh opened again.

“ Don't blame him, dear Mrs Sherbrook. He did not know what he was saying ! His death was a happy release at the last ! a happy release ! a mercy to be thankful for ! My dear Mrs Sherbrook, no one could have wished him to live on in that dreadful, half-paralysed state. . . . ” And then the best of women dwelt with eloquence upon my uncle's last sufferings. My poor aunt was visibly affected by the recollection of his sad restless pain. “ I was not always in the room, my dear Mrs Sherbrook,” said Mrs Stewart ; “ but I was always near enough to hear and see and suffer with him and you.”

“ Oh, Catherine, Catherine ! you are kind to me again ! ” cried Aunt Jane, laying her head on Mrs Stewart's shoulder ; “ you are very kind to forgive me so soon, but really, really, Catherine, it was not my fault that poor dear Edward would not see you. It was Edward's own fault, and he said he hated . . . ”

Aunt Jane could not finish her sentence, because

Mrs Stewart forced her rather suddenly to drink a glass of water. "Drink this, and you will feel better soon. My poor dear Mrs Sherbrook, you will be better soon! This is a dreadful day for you; the day of your husband's funeral!"

"Oh, Edward, Edward!" sobbed Aunt Jane, "was he only buried to-day? It seems such a long time, Catherine, since I saw the funeral moving away from the front door!"

"Yes, yes, my dear Mrs Sherbrook, he was buried to-day, and it is just three days since you saw him lying in his coffin."

At the recollection of that sight my aunt shivered from head to foot, but did not speak.

"He was so deadly pale," said Mrs Stewart. Aunt Jane still trembled, but neither spoke nor cried. "He was so deadly pale," repeated Mrs Stewart. "Oh, Mrs Sherbrook! have you forgotten how he looked that awful day?"

She is a fiend, thought I. Aunt Jane gave a horrid scream. "It was you who made me look at him, Catherine!" she cried, and was seized with a fit of hysterics.

The admirable Catherine was then so kind to her; oh, so kind! and soothed and petted her, and held a wet handkerchief to her forehead, and sent George to ask Harriet for her sal-volatile, and Thomas to ask Snipkins for her eau-de-cologne. I think Mrs Stewart feared the servants' ears far more than she did either David's or mine.

When Aunt Jane became somewhat composed, Mrs Stewart advised her not to tax her poor distracted nerves by remaining any longer in the room, where she had hardly ever eaten a meal without poor dear Mr Sherbrook: "it is that memory which upsets you, my dear Mrs Sherbrook!" and she persuaded my aunt to finish her dinner in the drawing-room. Poor Aunt Jane seemed almost pleased to think she was too much overcome to eat in the dining-room. Calming into long sobs, she leant on Catherine's neck, and was thus helped by her dear indefatigable creature into the next room. Catherine said she could not leave Mrs Sherbrook—she must try and coax poor dear Mrs Sherbrook to eat something; so she had the rest of her own dinner sent into the drawing-room as well as my aunt's.

David was quite mystified by the conduct of these (to him) most incomprehensible of ladies.

While the servants were in the room we did not speak. When they left David got up from table, and stood looking blankly out of the window. David whistled in a low tone. "Hush, David!" said I; "Aunt Jane may hear you whistling, and be hurt." David stopped instantly, and said he was not aware he had been whistling. "I am thinking, Sophy!" he exclaimed, "or rather I am trying to think! It is hardly possible to unravel anything in this house; you never even know if people are friends or enemies! One's own head gets confused! yet I am sure there has been some treachery and cheating about this will. I am sure there has!"

"I know it, David," I answered; "because my uncle really liked James Sherbrook, and intended to make him his heir."

"Yes," said David; "in the former will James Sherbrook was his heir. Your aunt was left residuary legatee, and you were left the reversion of £30,000. Your uncle read me that will the day before our marriage. It is perfectly clear to me the attorney did not draw up the will your uncle told him to make. This is clear enough to me, and may be to you, Sophy, but it will never be clear to anybody else—never! Your poor Aunt Jane is in a hopeless state of mind. I declare she makes me feel as if my own brains were topsy-turvy! No evidence of hers would be worth a straw. There is no understanding her,—no understanding anything! There is nothing clear in this house,—nothing sure and certain but your uncle's death. He is dead. That alone is clear! for I can't even make out what he died of. I have asked everybody here except your aunt, and it is no good asking her! she would vow he was killed by repeated chills on the liver. The servants tell me Dr Daly says he died of paralysis. Mr Buggle calls it suppressed gout. They all call it something, yet no two agree."

"Ah, David!" I replied, "it was seventy-three years of age Uncle Sherbrook died of; it was seventy-three long years! but no one likes to call that illness by its name. Most people seem unable to believe in that sickness from which there is no recovery. Although," said I, bitterly, "that disease, David, which so few

believe in, has killed more men and women in this country side than ever the plague would kill!"

Time, relentless cruel Time, is indeed a terrible poisoner! and with a cup for ever in his hand. He sits in a graveyard, and mixes our potion at his ease; quietly and ever so slowly, and yet for all men—not only for my poor uncle, who was just dead! but for all men—he has a poison that will kill. He forgets no one! We should not deceive ourselves. No one will be forgotten by him. Our joy does not move him, and our sorrow will not touch him, for he is too old at the dreadful trade of killing all men, good and bad, and rich and poor.

CHAPTER IV.

DAVID is essentially of an easy-going nature; he dislikes doing unpleasant things even more than most men.

The morning after our arrival at Sherbrook Hall I begged David to examine and question my aunt in all haste, while there might still be a hope she would stick to the facts she was so full of the evening before.

"Examine your aunt! question your aunt!" exclaimed David. "By Jove! by Jove!"

"Be quick about it, David," I urged, "or she will be confusing the clear story she almost told yesterday. To-morrow, with the judicious help of her Catherine and Mr Buggle, she may be sincerely under some new and wrong impression. Examine her to-day."

"Examine her!" repeated David. "By Jove! by Jove!"

I continued urging him to act without delay, but he dreaded Aunt Jane's hysterics, and had quite a horror of her mind, which, like the banyan tree, sent forth endless branches, each branch a root, each root a tree,

casting afresh new branches, new roots, new trees. "It is a provoking mind, David," I said; "I know it is! But have patience with it. Think of poor Uncle Sherbrook, Davie, dear. Think what a stain this will cast upon his memory."

"Yes, indeed," said my husband; "a will which cuts off his natural heir, and leaves his widow next door to a beggar! And for a man to make it," he exclaimed, "who never did anything else but make his will!"

"Ah!" cried I, and tears filled my eyes, "this is the sorest point of all! It grieves my very heart to think that which a man has been most proud of in his life, and thought he did so well, should just be exactly the very thing which at the last he did badly, even worse, in a manner, to bring reproach upon his memory!"

Had Uncle Sherbrook never taken pride in his aptitude for business, and for law, this particular stroke which bewildering death, approaching him, felled upon his clear mind, would not have seemed so cruel a hit to me. But there was bitter irony in thus striking a man foolish where he had thought himself, and others thought him, so wise!

"Your uncle and aunt between them," said David, "have made a hopeless mess of their affairs! But we are in a delicate position, Sophy."

"No," said I; "for should this will be broken, my uncle would be declared to have died intestate; you and I would get nothing, but Aunt Jane and James Sherbrook would."

"Poor Sherbrook!" exclaimed David; "it is awfully

hard lines on him ! awfully !” He pitied the unfortunate rector intensely, and he even pitied Aunt Jane,—“ a more utterly helpless human being never existed !” he said.

I eagerly seized this favourable opportunity, and so worked on David’s compassion and sense of justice, that at last I got him to promise he would speak to Aunt Jane. I hastened the interview, fearing he might change his mind and fight shy of her if he were given time for reflection. I brought the two together and then slipped away, thinking David would have a better chance of picking Aunt Jane’s brains if alone with her, than if “ Sophy ” were by as a kind of standing transition provoking sundry little irrelevant *asides*.

David came out of my aunt’s room in a more hopeful state of mind than I could possibly have expected. “ I declare,” he exclaimed, “ she actually sticks to what she said last night !”

“ No wonder you are surprised.”

And David told me he had sent for Mr Buggle, as Aunt Jane had promised to tell the same story to the attorney’s face which she had just told behind his back. “ I had not far to send, Sophy, for that !” Buggle is in the study, where he and Mrs Stewart have been shut up since eight o’clock this morning. They won’t let your Aunt Jane go in there, and this appears to distress her greatly. Buggle sends word he will see her here in the drawing-room instead. I hope to goodness your admirable Catherine will

not come with him. No man has a chance against a woman like that, for she was born a rascally attorney! She and Buggle are a nice match! A nice pair to have domesticated in a house! Your uncle ought to have turned them out long ago."

"Oh, David!" said I, "he could not; poor man! he could not!"

"Well, well!" replied David softly, "I don't want to be hard upon him now, Sophy."

My husband begged me on no account to run away, but rather to stand and back his cross-examination, and be a witness on Aunt Jane's side,—“if your aunt begins to ramble, you can bring her back to the point better than I can. What on earth keeps her now?” he cried uneasily; “I thought she was following me. I hope she is not confusing her brains by the way.” David was in a highly impatient state, and kept exclaiming, “By Jove! I wish I were well through this affair! most unpleasant one for me! By Jove! what's keeping her now?”

Aunt Jane did not appear for some little time. At last she came in, exclaiming, “Mr Buggle says he will follow me in a moment, for I met him in the hall, and he was talking to me, and I am afraid he is angry with me. I am afraid he is very angry, and oh dear! I hope I shall never have a lawsuit, because poor dear Edward had such a horror of my ever having a lawsuit; and poor dear Edward said just before his death, when he was ill, oh so very, very ill. . .”

"Mrs Sherbrook," cried David, interrupting her hastily, "I implore you to sit down and compose yourself." He eyed her black-bordered handkerchief nervously. "I implore you to be quite quiet, quite cool, Mrs Sherbrook. Merely say *yes* or *no* to Mr Buggle's questions, and keep very close to the point when you are telling your own story."

"I always do keep to the point," replied my aunt, with offended dignity; "but it is no good my saying anything now, because nobody believes me, and I don't think Mr Buggle believes me, and he used to . . ."

"The great point, Aunt Jane," said I, "is to tell exactly the same story in Mr Buggle's presence which you have told in his absence."

"Exactly the same!" interposed David—"exactly!"

"Repeat, Aunt Jane," I continued, "that Mr Buggle confessed to knowing nothing whatever about the £45,000 worth of securities hidden at my uncle's command in your own wardrobe, and also recall clearly"—I laid emphasis upon clearly—"recall clearly to his mind that he himself, with his own lips, declared to you had he known of the existence of these shares, my uncle's will should have made you residuary legatee."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed my aunt; "poor dear Edward always made me residuary legatee in all his wills, and he always . . ."

"Repeat to Mr Buggle," I said, going over my words again, "that he himself declared had he known the

existence of these shares, my uncle should have made you residuary legatee."

"But Edward never told Mr Buggle; never, Sophy! and Mr Buggle was afraid there would be no ready money for the heir who, very likely, Mr Buggle thinks, may have a lawsuit, so when Mr Buggle wrote out Edward's will he did not make me residuary legatee; and he says he would have done so if he had known there was so much ready money, because he would first have asked Edward to settle some of it on Gordon-Sherbrook."

"Mr Buggle said this?" I exclaimed in a loud voice; "he allowed all this? Repeat every word of this to his face. Now, Aunt Jane, mind you repeat it—now mind you do. You must not forget; you must repeat it."

"It is all very fine for you, Sophy, to wish me to repeat things which make people angry," retorted my aunt; "but I don't want to have a lawsuit, and Mr Buggle says if I repeat that again he can bring an action for libel against me, and poor dear Edward . . ."

"Are they not Mr Buggle's own words?" I asked.

"But Mr Buggle," replied my aunt, "now says he did not say them, and he has just been talking to me, and he says I did not know what I said or anybody said to me after your uncle's death or before it either; and indeed, poor dear Edward! it was a dreadful shock to me, because he had so often attacks of his liver before, and really perhaps . . ."

David groaned aloud.

The door opened gently as if by stealth, and Mr Buggle walked in amongst us: he was perfectly unabashed and in full possession of his usual bland benevolence. David revived a little when he saw the attorney was alone.

"Oh, Mr Buggle! Mr Buggle!" exclaimed Aunt Jane, "you know it was not I who sent for you! It was Sophy and David Scott, and they want to make me repeat again what I have just told you out in the hall about Edward making me residuary legatee, though I tell Sophy you say I may have an action for libel, and I don't want to have a lawsuit at all; because poor dear Edward always had such a horror of my ever having a lawsuit, indeed he had!"

The attorney rubbed his hands, and smiling, said: "Mrs Sherbrook, I think you are labouring under some little misapprehension. I venture to perceive you have misunderstood me. As the widow of my late respected and lamented client, your words must have the greatest weight with me."

"Poor dear Edward! he would be glad to hear you say that, Mr Buggle!" cried Aunt Jane, with tears, I verily believe, of gratitude. She was grateful like some child whose dreaded master does not strike, but unexpectedly approves.

"I am only too happy," continued Mr Buggle, with reassuring condescension,—"only too happy to give my utmost attention, my fullest consideration, to the remarks of any lady or gentleman."

"And more especially, sir, I hope, to your own,"

replied David, haughtily: he did not like being patronised by the attorney. "Mrs Sherbrook," he said, turning to my aunt, "pray repeat Mr Buggle's own words, and ask him if he remembers them."

Aunt Jane cast uncertain eyes from Buggle to David and from David to Buggle. The man of law and libel looked so benign that her terror was a little assuaged; besides, Mr Buggle himself urged her to speak. "What David wants me to remind you of, and *me/* what Sophy wants ~~to~~ remind you of also, Mr Buggle," said Aunt Jane, nervously, "is that you said to me yesterday, when you told me I was not left residuary legatee in Edward's last will, and I told you I always was residuary legatee in all poor dear Edward's wills, and Edward always explained to me what that meant, so I know; you said to me, and we were standing by the round table at the time just near the big Bible Edward always . . ."

"When you were standing by this table, Mr Buggle said to you?" put in David, trying to keep her to the point.

"Where was I?" cried Aunt Jane; "if you interrupt me like that, David, I shall forget what I am saying."

"You were saying," I suggested, "that Mr Buggle said something to you about your not having been left residuary legatee in the will Uncle Sherbrook made just before his death."

"Ah! poor dear Edward!" began Aunt Jane; "he did not know anybody or anything, and he said . . ."

"But what did Mr Buggle say?" I insisted; "tell us, Aunt Jane, what Mr Buggle said."

"Mrs Scott," remarked the attorney, "is determined to keep you persistently to her own point, Mrs Sherbrook."

"Sophy always does interrupt and contradict everybody, Mr Buggle, except herself," cried my aunt pettishly, "and she never lets anybody talk without arguing."

David stared at her in speechless dismay.

I still persevered: "You were going to tell us, Aunt Jane," I continued, "what Mr Buggle said to you about the shares, and my uncle's . . ."

"If only you would stop arguing, Sophy," she exclaimed, "I should remember exactly what I wanted to say, and I am sure so would Mr Buggle too. It is you who interrupt us, Sophy, and you really know nothing of business whatever, though you always tried to make Edward think you did."

"And Mrs Scott nearly succeeded," insinuated the attorney—"nearly, but not quite. Mr Sherbrook preferred trusting his property to other heirs."

"No," replied my aunt angrily—"no, Mr Buggle; Sophy never really made her uncle think she knew anything of business at all. It was not Sophy, it was I who always helped poor dear Edward to make his wills, and poor dear Edward always explained to me what residuary legatee meant, and he never explained it to Sophy, and Sophy knows nothing about it, and Edward never made Sophy residuary legatee, and he always made me in all his wills . . ."

"But not in his last will, Aunt Jane," said I artfully

—"not in his last! and that is the only one of any importance now."

"Don't argue, Sophy!" was the reply I got. "You don't know what you are arguing about! It was all a mistake, and Mr Buggle knows it, and told me it was, and poor dear Edward intended to make me residuary legatee, but Mr Buggle thought he had better not, because he thought there would be no ready money for Gordon-Sherbrook Stewart, and Mr Buggle said so, for Edward never told him he had nearly £50,000 worth of railway shares in the brown tin box in my wardrobe, and Edward made me promise not to tell Mr Buggle, so it was not really Mr Buggle's fault if he did not know anything about the shares, Sophy, as he had never read any of Edward's wills before; and when he was dying, poor dear Edward told me never, never to tell him."

The statement I had at last dragged from Aunt Jane was an accidental miracle. It raised David's spirits. David asked Mr Buggle to say if he had or had not made the remarks just repeated by Aunt Jane.

The attorney smiled: "I totally and entirely deny," he answered, "having made use of the words Mrs Sherbrook ascribes to me, in the manner she pretends. Mrs Sherbrook is perhaps a little inaccurate at times. Without intending it!" Though he smiled, if possible with increased benevolence, he spoke in a severe tone, ill suited to his physiognomy. Aunt Jane looked alarmed.

"Mr Buggle," asked David, "were you or were you not aware of the existence of these shares?"

"I do not admit your right to question me, sir," replied Buggle.

"You had better not, David!" cried Aunt Jane in a tremor; "you may have a lawsuit!"

"Although, sir," continued the attorney, "I do not admit your right to question me upon the subject of Mr Sherbrook's will, I have no objection to say that Mrs Sherbrook is labouring under a total misapprehension of existing facts. I should have thought, sir, it was hardly necessary for me to state that I possessed the late Mr Sherbrook's unreserved confidence, and was perfectly acquainted with the true state of his affairs."

I said, "This statement of yours, Mr Buggle, and Aunt Jane's are strangely at variance."

The attorney did not immediately reply. He eyed Aunt Jane in a way which appeared to make her extremely uncomfortable. She fidgeted as if she had two lawsuits, and not merely two eyes, fixed upon her. At length, when he did speak, he spoke slowly, and with cutting clearness. There could be no mistake in any word of his. He answered me, but looked at Aunt Jane. "Mrs Sherbrook," he said, "has twice informed me with her own lips that Mr Sherbrook's unexpected illness gave her a nervous shock, which, for the time being, completely incapacitated her from remembering either words or circumstances correctly. She moreover has frequently expressed the gravest doubts as to whether she and the late Mr Sherbrook knew what

they were doing during the last few days of Mr Sherbrook's life."

"Indeed, indeed," cried Aunt Jane, before I could stop her—"indeed I did not know what I was saying or doing, for I felt poor dear Edward's illness dreadfully! dreadfully!"

My aunt provoked me, and I exclaimed in an angry manner, "For goodness sake, Aunt Jane! don't try and make out you took leave of your senses!"

"The first paroxysm of unbearable grief," suggested Mr Buggle, "will not unfrequently obscure the clearest memory, and tend to create a state of mental paralysis in which misconception becomes not only natural, but unavoidable." His severity relaxed, and he added in a voice which feigned the softest emotion, "I can testify that no widow has ever felt her sore bereavement with more heartrending sorrow than that experienced by Mrs Sherbrook."

Aunt Jane instantly began to cry. I think she partly wept with pleasure at hearing Mr Buggle do full justice to her tender heart. "Oh, Mr Buggle! Mr Buggle!" she sobbed; "you know I am a very feeling person, though Sophy says unkind, cross things, and does not think so, but when poor dear Sophia died (Sophy's poor dear mother), I felt it a great deal more than Sophy, and I am sure I shall never, never recover poor dear Edward's death, never as long as I live! though poor dear Edward did not say good-bye to me, but thought my hand was Sophy's, because he was so queer! oh, so queer!"

"It is not uncommon at the last, Mrs Sherbrook," remarked Mr Buggle, "for illness to affect the mind."

"What?" cried I, addressing the attorney, "do you intend to prove that Uncle Sherbrook, being affected by paralysis, was in an unfit state to make a will?"

For a moment a look of fierce anger disturbed the man's mask, but it was quickly smoothed away by that habitual vile benevolence which I hated with an irritated hatred. It annoys me beyond endurance, not to see a man's mind worn openly in his face. I like a rogue to look a rogue, and not a smiling humbug hung about the head with the long white locks of St Peter and St Paul.

Mr Buggle did not speak until he had perfectly recovered his usual composure. He rubbed his hands and smiled, and said, in a condescending, fatherly sort of manner: "Young ladies make admirable women of business, owing to the brilliancy of their imagination. They imagine it is as easy to break a will as to make a will. Experience alone can teach a lady that a will is not invalid merely because her own name does not happen to be mentioned in it."

David had been perfectly silent for some time—he had abandoned the "argument" in despair! but at these words he fired up. Aunt Jane, seeing him red-den with passion, prevented his speaking by crying out: "David is angry, Mr Buggle, and Sophy is angry, because of poor dear Edward's will. What shall I do? What shall I do if David hates me? for you know, Mr Buggle, Sophy hates me because of poor dear

Edward's will, and Sophy told me so, Mr Buggle; she told me so. Sophy said she hated me, indeed she did!"

David was irritated beyond measure by Aunt Jane. "Mrs Sherbrook," he exclaimed angrily, "Sophy never said anything of the kind. Allow me to remark you have no right to state what is untrue. If you can stick to nothing else, you should stick to the truth."

Aunt Jane was aghast at this. "Untrue! untrue!" she wailed; "oh! poor dear Edward! if poor dear Edward could only hear you! Edward knew I never said anything untrue in all my life, and so does Mr Buggle. Mr Buggle knows it!"

A soothing compliment from Mr Buggle was the natural consequence of this appeal.

"Sophy knows she said she hated me! Sophy knows she did!"

"Yes, Aunt Jane," I confessed, to David's amazement; "but for a very different reason—a very different one." My aunt is one of those extraordinary people who can never stick to a point, unless it is some cross-cornered affair of their own making. Instead of forthwith diverging to poor dear Edward's illness, or to poor dear Edward's will, she cried—

"You see! you see! Sophy does not contradict me! though Sophy always does contradict me if she can, but Sophy knows she said she hated me, and Sophy did say it, and she hated me because of poor dear Edward's will."

"No, no, Aunt Jane—not for that reason; for

another,"—but I said this more for form's sake than from any hope of being able to remove the wrong impression. Aunt Jane did not listen to me; she kept on repeating: "Sophy said she hated me! indeed she did! indeed she did! and you know, Mr Buggle, it was all because of poor dear Edward's will!"

"She would swear to this in a court of justice, Mr Scott," said the attorney, quietly; "she would also swear to the distracted state of her own mind at the time of Mr Sherbrook's illness and death. Under cross-examination, Mrs Sherbrook would swear to a great many important points—points well worth your consideration, Mr Scott, and not perhaps altogether unworthy of yours, Mrs Scott."

Whereupon Mr Buggle, with elaborate politeness, bade us a courteous good morning, and left us to ponder over his last pregnant remark.

Aunt Jane rose immediately, exclaiming huffily that David thought she was a liar: she wept, and declared she could not stay any longer in the room with a man capable of thinking she did not tell the truth.

CHAPTER V.

“DAVID thinks I am a liar! David, my own nephew by marriage, says I am a liar! What would poor dear Edward say if he only knew that David Scott thinks I am a liar, and says I am a liar!”

This wretched cross-cornered huff was the sole reward my unlucky husband got for trying, much against his will, to save Aunt Jane from ruin: some £300 a-year was nothing short of ruin to her!

David was of opinion that Mr Buggle may have known nothing about the flaw in Aunt Jane's marriage settlements, and that, notwithstanding his assertion to the contrary, he was certainly unacquainted with the true state of my uncle's fortune and affairs. “It would be ruin for him to confess his ignorance now,” said David, “but had he known of these shares in time, I am sure he would have let your aunt have some of them. I expect Mrs Stewart was better informed than he. Buggle is quite sharp enough to understand this will must damage him in the county, when people get wind of the £45,000; for even now it is called Buggle's will, and not your uncle's. And

then remember he had none of the personal spite against her he appears to have against you, Sophy."

David's idea was that Mr Buggle thought there would be no ready money for the heir, or rather for the lawsuit, which his own client Gordon-Sherbrook Stewart might have to defend against the next of kin, unless he made his client residuary legatee. "Attorneys," said David, "like to make sure there is money enough for a lawsuit. So Buggle just disobeyed Mr Sherbrook's injunctions, knowing he was robbing your aunt, but not knowing to what extent. He may have thought he was providing decently enough for her with her settlements, and the interest of the £10,000." The attorney being partly in the dark, David thought him only half a rogue. "I tell you, Sophy," he said, moralising for a wonder, "nearly all the mischief in the world comes through the half-honest and half-dishonest scamps. Buggle is like most rascals, just half a rogue!"

"Then if only half a rogue," said I, "he is an entire pious old hypocrite! and Satan is in all hypocrites, only it seems to me, David, he stands upright in the pious one! especially if the pious rascal happens to be an attorney."

"Or a banker, Sophy: you see," said David, continuing to moralise—"you see visible officious piety only furthers the intrigues of rascally attorneys and bankers, for it has nothing on earth to say to their real business. When they pray with you, you may be sure they are ready to ruin you. The devil, who

was upright, Sophy, kneels down, and is taller than ever when he gets up again—it's his nature to grow on his knees. By Jove!" he cried, laughing, "but an action for libel would lie against me!"

There is no doubt it was quite in keeping with Uncle Sherbrook's pompously secretive nature, that he should not have placed unreserved confidence in his attorney, especially when he had learned to distrust the man, and never intended any one to make his own will but himself. Clearly that last will was one wrenched from him in the fever and confusion of paralysis.

David thought Aunt Jane could make out an excellent case for herself and the Reverend James, and prove my uncle to have died intestate, he having been in an unfit state to make a will, if only, as David said, she were any one on earth but herself! But he declared she would ruin any case and be convicted of perjury into the bargain. He vowed she would give every answer but the right one,—“and she is the only witness on her own side!” he said; “for that aspiring saint of hers she calls Snipkins has quite gone over to the other camp, and remembers nothing which could compromise either Mr Buggle or Mrs Stewart.”

So David considered Aunt Jane and her affairs to be in a perfectly hopeless muddle, and indeed they were! The natural confusion was, moreover, complicated each day, I might almost say each hour of each day, by my aunt's marvellous capacity for getting under wrong impressions.

Happening one day to notice my ringless finger, she

immediately inquired, with a scream—"Where is your diamond ring? Oh! Sophy, Sophy, where is your diamond ring?" I instinctively felt the Paris tale to be entirely unsuited to her mind; but David, foreseeing nothing, told her the whole truth after his usual frank manner, not mincing matters or excusing himself in the slightest degree. In fact, between ourselves, I think Aunt Jane's horror of his almost incredible wickedness rather amused him, and he piled up the tragedy to make her stare. And she did stare! stare with both eyes at the gambler before her! David finished up his shocking tale by saying quite unnecessarily, "But there was no duel, Mrs Sherbrook."

"Duel?" she screamed.

"No, there was none; but there might have been, perhaps."

"There might have been a duel!"

"I dare say; if Sophy's ring had not put the pistols quite out of the question by giving me the five hundred then and there."

"Pistols! pistols!" gasped my aunt.

It was really very naughty of David to amuse himself in this way, and he was punished for his giddiness. Aunt Jane soon grew under the impression that David had fought a duel in the purlieus of Paris, and with one of the lowest class of English outcasts. It was hard enough for me to prevent her from believing he had killed the man; gamblers were nearly always murderers! In all the stories Aunt Jane had ever

heard or read, gamblers were always murderers, always!—"for, Sophy, whatever you may think, I think duelling is murdering, and duelling and gambling go together, for a dreadful vice always leads into some fearful, horrible crime; and I am sure I always told you David Scott was a very bad man for you to marry, and you married him quite against my better judgment, and against poor dear Edward's; and I know now what I did not know before, and that is why poor dear Edward never mentioned your name in his last will, for he always mentioned it in all his wills before, and it was because Edward thought David would gamble away all your money, and Edward knew David was gambling in Paris." I clearly proved my uncle knew nothing of the kind; that it was perfectly impossible for him to know it; that he actually died on the very day my husband lost the £500. Yet—who can believe me?—I only convinced Aunt Jane that I was arguing!

In due course of time the whole county heard Sophy Scott's name had been omitted from old Mr Sherbrook's will, because Mr Sherbrook had been informed that David Scott had gambled and lost a large sum of money within a week of his wedding. The whole county heard the story and believed it. Dullshire people implicitly believe it to this day. It has become a tradition in the land, and the tradition of a country district never changes. It was undoubtedly Aunt Jane herself who first gave the idea to Mrs

Stewart and Mr Buggle, and they who blazed it to the county.

Notwithstanding all that had happened, Aunt Jane continued to tell Mr Buggle everything. The two were constantly having "chance" interviews, which I strongly suspected were contrived by the artful Buggle, for they were sure to take place "quite by accident," and invariably when no third person was present. The attorney still retained, partly by flattery and old custom, and partly by fear, a powerful and most peculiar influence over my aunt.

David and I warned Aunt Jane against the danger of talking to Mr Buggle without a witness on her side, and she provoked David by replying that Sophy had prejudiced him against Mr Buggle, and would go to Mr Jones instead, though no one could tell by looking at Mr Jones's pew on Sunday if he went to church or not; but it was very dangerous to be prejudiced like Sophy against Mr Buggle, as Mr Buggle could bring a lawsuit against any one who was prejudiced against him, and that for her part, she never would say anything against him, because Edward always had such a horror of her having a lawsuit. "And that was why your poor dear husband, in all his wills, always made you residuary legatee!" exclaimed David satirically. He was much irritated by my aunt.

"Hush!" whispered Aunt Jane, in fear and trembling. She looked nervously towards the door, and seeing it was open, shut it before she dared give an answer. She then exclaimed—"I know you say I am

a liar! It is a shocking, shocking word, but it is a shocking thing, and you think I am a liar; I know you do, and you don't mind anything I say: all the same, I will tell you that you must not say anything more about my being left residuary legatee in all poor dear Edward's wills, and you really must not, for you will only make me have a lawsuit, and it is much safer not to talk about lawsuits or attorneys at all. Attorneys are very very dangerous people to talk about! very!" Aunt Jane drew down her upper lip and was silent. Great as the effort must have been to her, she remained so for three minutes and a half, and even then would not mention Mr Buggle's name again. We were amazed! At last, by dint of questioning, we discovered Aunt Jane to be sincerely convinced that if you speak well of an attorney, it may somehow or other cost you thirteen and sixpence, while if you speak ill of him, you are sure to have an action for libel! I was forced to admit, that for once Aunt Jane was under no very false impression.

"David, I admire that Buggle's talent," said I; "for undoubtedly it is admirable!"

But David was not in sufficiently good humour to admire anybody's cleverness. He was too intensely provoked by Aunt Jane. She had worried his pity to death, and had quite exhausted his patience. Being a kindly, sympathetic man, he had shown more patience than I had ever expected; but what man's patience could stand "David thinks I am a liar, and says I am a liar!" repeated often and illogically, and with tears,

always with tears! If only the tears had been forgotten! David was not a man who could argue with a woman's tears, although Aunt Jane's were not to him what most women's were: they only puzzled and overpowered him. They made him helpless for the moment, and angry afterwards. My aunt's nervous habit of pouring out tears to the right and to the left upon subjects that were not tearful, deadened David to those tears of real grief which she shed from time to time, for there was true sorrow in the queer heart of the poor distracted and distracting widow.

I saw the grief; so, provoked as I was, my pity for Aunt Jane did not die. There was a bond of sympathy between us which kept it living, for I too felt a grief within me hard to comfort, and our sorrow was the same: when my aunt did not irritate me beyond endurance, I almost loved her for remembering the poor dead man whom I remembered, but whom every one else had forgotten. David said he could not understand how I had ever become so deeply attached to Uncle Sherbrook. "Your uncle was a good man, and a thorough gentleman," he said, "but ponderous, and decidedly peculiar." David invariably told me exactly what he thought.

Had others mourned for Uncle Sherbrook a little more, I might indeed, perhaps, have mourned for him less. But he was so cruelly soon forsaken in his grave by the thoughts of all except Aunt Jane and me,—so entirely thrust aside—so clean forgotten in his own house, where he had been obeyed and feared and flat-

tered,—that I grew to love him, when dead and out of sight, with a pitiful love more tender, maybe, than any I had felt for him in his lifetime. And then he was never “bilious” now, poor man ! so I merely remembered his kindness and true affection. And Aunt Jane was like me ; only she idealised “poor dear Edward” after a fashion of her own.

She turned his wisdom and infallibility into a sort of tearful and beautiful dogma. She quoted “poor dear Edward’s” opinions on all subjects, and if any one disagreed with them, she wept. But the strange part of the matter was that, little by little, she fell unknown to herself, into the habit of ascribing all her own wrong impressions to “poor dear Edward” ! My aunt quickly forgot her husband was a very silent man, who had not spoken as much in his lifetime as she spoke in a day. Uncle Sherbrook had certainly been the least garrulous of men ; yet my aunt was doing her utmost to make a reputation of almost imbecile garrulity for him with posterity !

It is well the spirit of the dead should not linger here below, but soar to a higher world and nobler thoughts, for if worms should not devour a dead man’s pride, what bitter humiliation would he not feel at the foolishly idealised, the distorted, unnatural reputation which, too often, is all he has left behind him in this world ? All that remains of him, even in the memory of those who were so near to him, they might at least have known, and remembered him as he was.

Surely, thought I, ambition would die in many a

heart, and the love of fame grow into cold indifference, if only we could see the wretch—the puling wretch!—who might survive us in the name we gave our life and intellect, and sold, perhaps, our soul to make.

The immortality in this world we hear so much of, and for which men long as if it were a power that destroyed death and made their corpse something glorious, and no poor decaying body, would be to most of those to whom chance gave it but a farce, a cruel farce! far crueller than the tragedy of a forgotten life and a forgotten grave.

Of all the irritations with which Aunt Jane exasperated David, none was more calculated to drive him crazy than this her newly invented and quickly developing trick of ascribing everything she herself said to an idealised and infallible Edward. It positively enraged my husband to hear her cry plaintively, and then discover he himself was supposed to be “arguing” with “poor dear Edward”!

The outward manifestations of Aunt Jane’s grief were altogether so odd that I must allow it was quite impossible for any man, even the most sympathetic, to be permanently touched by such peculiar sorrow. Aunt Jane imagined herself to express the most inconsolable part of her anguish by tying up her ringlets and hiding them under her widow’s cap, like relics of a sacred romance. Her own thoughts were frequently occupied with her curls, so she often mentioned them, and, with an air of regretful, tearful piety, told us how much poor dear Edward had admired her hair. I

think she came to look upon her ringlets as upon a holy joy belonging exclusively, by divine command, to the blessed state of matrimony ; and she persuaded herself (I cannot exactly tell how) that the Bible had clearly ordained a widow's hair should be worn quite plain in front.

And then my aunt, somehow or other, mixed up her tender devotion to her late husband with the double elastic she used for stringing her jet necklace and mine. She found mine had been strung upon a single line, and I declare she spoke of that single elastic almost as if it were a kind of one-threaded, weak, half-hearted affliction. Her regrets for "poor dear Edward" were also dove-tailed into regrets for the embossed silver teapot with the bear's-head spout, which no longer appeared upon the breakfast-table or at afternoon tea. Aunt Jane had a personal affection for this teapot,—I can call the feeling by no other name. Mrs Stewart had taken possession of it in the name of Gordon-Sherbrook Stewart, and also of the four little dancing-bear muffineers, and indeed of all the plate. She would give us nothing but a few worn-out plated spoons and forks, and not enough of them. We had a brown kitchen teapot at breakfast, and a kitchen mustard-pot and pepper-castor at luncheon and dinner. The ancestral punch-bowl and the tankard which had stood upon the sideboard ever since I knew Sherbrook Hall, had also disappeared. The absence of all these familiar friends was a real sorrow to Aunt Jane, and, I might add, a deep humilia-

tion, for to her they were not only dear old friends, but ones with whom she had held a certain social position. When she no longer saw them around, she seemed to ^{her} feel degraded and fallen from her natural position as "Edward's wife." A woman like Aunt Jane can lose £45,000 cheerfully, because she will not at first grasp the fact, or understand a change of fortune, until experience has had time to teach her what it means; but she cannot lose her silver teapot and her much-prized little knick-knacks without immediate tears. Their loss is visible and tangible, and goes straight home to her heart and pride.

I may seem to exaggerate, yet I speak literally the truth when I say that breakfast, luncheon, and dinner became a thrice-recurring anguish to my aunt. The moment our attempt to make Aunt Jane tell a clear story in Mr Buggle's presence had failed, Mrs Stewart relapsed into hardness and perfect safety, and callous indifference. She sat at the head of Gordon-Sherbrook's table, and paid no attention whatever to my aunt, nor indeed to anybody or anything, not even to the steeple. She was too preoccupied to talk between the courses; her mind seemed to be taking a perpetual inventory, and her eyes looked as if they noted every nail in the wall. The admirable Catherine ate very quickly and voraciously, and disappeared in no time. The instant she left the room, the servants would leave also. Aunt Jane seemed afraid to ask them to stay. My aunt always was a little afraid of her servants, but now she looked like a disgraced

culprit in their presence: you could see she was ashamed to give them an order, unless she could do so from the head of her own table.

Her humiliation and suffering were so real, that David would be touched, and would melt towards her and have patience with her, and have pity for a while. But the inevitable moment would come again when my aunt, as if possessed by a kind of fatality, would make herself an illogical, maddening irritation, and her grief, her heartfelt grief, a very funny sort of comedy,—no! not exactly a comedy, for I have laughed and cried at it together, and have felt that, instead of a comedy, it was a tragedy that was being played before my eyes at Sherbrook Hall. It was a tragic sight to see the admirable Catherine's coarse rapacity holding open revel, side by side with death, in my poor uncle's house; and yet this grasping, clutching ghoul of unabashed human greed, sickening as it was, did not offend and pain me more than the sad tragedy of my aunt's helpless, abandoned state, because those by whom she was now forsaken, insulted, betrayed, had lived long years upon her kindness. It is no excuse for Mrs Stewart that she had never loved Aunt Jane, but had flattered her solely to advance her own plots and plans, although I dare say Mrs Stewart thinks no better excuse need ever be invented. I have noticed that clever intriguers look upon convenient fools as their rightful prey, and, if they be of the pious type, as prey given them by an approving Providence,—flies

created under a special dispensation in order to be deceived into the spider's web.

I am not aware that Mrs Stewart has ever been ashamed of her conduct to Aunt Jane. There is far less self-reproach in this world than people will believe. The admirable Catherine has the art of dressing-up her actions, like her worldliness, very nicely in Christian charity. Everything she did at Sherbrook Hall was done in the name of her son: it was in his name that she seized Aunt Jane's jewels, thus making even rapacity beautiful by maternal devotion. It is no wonder she manages to think well of herself, and makes others think well of her too. Strangers can never much dislike this most plausible of women. It is when you come near enough to Mrs Stewart really to know her, that you hate her. David had grown to hate this woman. Her rapacity, her cheerful greediness, made him positively loathe her; yet men like David do not often hate.

When, in the name of Gordon-Sherbrook Stewart, my uncle's residuary legatee, the admirable Catherine seized not only every jewel but every little trinket she found in Aunt Jane's and Uncle Sherbrook's rooms, David's indignation knew no bounds. He said Aunt Jane should instantly leave the house,—that she ought long ago to have left a house which was no more her own. He said rightly,—it was undignified for her to stay; but he would not tell her so himself! He made me tell her. He perfectly detested having a scene with Aunt Jane.

My task was no pleasant one,—it was even more painful than I had expected. I found, though Aunt Jane knew Sherbrook Hall was no longer hers, that she had not grasped what I might call the actual presence of the fact. The departure from her old home seemed to be a sort of hazy future to her, best not thought about—a kind of second mourning to be considered when the first set of widow's weeds and caps was wearing out. The idea had actually never struck her that she ought, without an hour's delay, to leave the home "where Edward and I, Sophy, have lived together for twenty years,—and where, if they would only let me go into the study, I should feel exactly as if Edward were sitting beside me and writing to Mr Buggle or making his will, as he used to do,—and I should be quite happy, and think poor dear Edward was not dead at all."

My aunt's words were funny, but her grief was intense. Her sorrow unnerved me, and I had not the courage to press her immediate departure. I saw her distracted mind could not yet bear the new idea. Her old home, the old custom of routine, those daily, hourly habits she loved, and her old affection for "Edward," were so entwined together, they made but one feeling, and that one feeling made her life. Poor thing! she clung to her home weakly, passionately, as we cling to life. Suddenly to wrench her from the old ties would be cruel. Indeed, at her age, I thought the shock might kill her; so I had patience with her, and tried, for her sake, to contain a little longer the

rage, and scorn, and loathing, I too felt towards Mrs Stewart.

But David had no patience left him. Aunt Jane's unwillingness to leave Sherbrook Hall seemed to him nothing but a contemptible want of dignity. He could see no excuse for it; he wondered how I could stay on another moment in the Stewarts' house; he wondered I did not leave Aunt Jane immediately to her own despicable imbecility.

But how could I leave Aunt Jane? It was then, for the first time, that we were both driven to look at my poor aunt's ruined state as it really was. She was literally without a penny of ready money, and the first instalment of her miserable pittance would not be due for several months.

For the present Aunt Jane could have no home but mine, and she had no friend but me; even her old servants had abandoned her. The Snipkins' tribe had given warning, and taken service with Mrs Stewart. Snipkins herself had become "housekeeper in the new hestablishment, and general hoverlooker hof heverything, with nobody hallowed to hinterfere in my harrangements, Mrs Scott!"

Aunt Jane wept bitter tears over the loss of her maid, and constantly declared no other person would ever know her ways. "Snipkins has her Bible at her finger-ends, and she always gives me my collar before my cuffs; but Harriet often gives me my cuffs before my collar. Snipkins knows all my little ways! No one will ever know my little ways like Snipkins!"

She seemed perfectly incapable of understanding she would not now be able to afford a lady's-maid at all, or a large establishment, or an expensive house. In fact, the truth was so unpleasant that David and I could hardly realise it ourselves.

We did not like to realise it. David especially hated to see it as it was. He could not bear to think it had become our duty to offer Aunt Jane a home until she could get into a house of her own. However, he said, he might not so much object to my allowing her £200, £300, £400, £500, even £600 a-year, and helping her to furnish a house for herself. He was in a humour to consent to any arrangement sooner than run the risk of living under the same roof with my aunt, for he vowed if she lived in my house, he would live out of it. I could not blame him. I neither blamed nor approved. I was at my wits' end, and did not know what to do. I could not find it in my heart to be hard and cruel, in her need, to Uncle Sherbrook's widow. Had I loved Aunt Jane better, I might perhaps have left her with more ease of conscience; but when we cannot pay a debt with real gratitude, we feel bound in honour to be kind in our actions—to be more unselfish and generous than if love were prompting us. It is like paying a man in money | only; we feel called upon to pay him double what we should pay our friend.

I said all this to David, and I perceived that, like the rest of the world, he thought the plain woman admirably suited to the duties of life. "You can

stand your aunt, Sophy," he said; "you have the knack of being able to put up with irritating people, so it is quite the right thing for you to stay on here as long as your aunt stays, and take care of her, for the Lord knows she can't take care of herself."

David moreover said that, upon reflection, he quite agreed with me in thinking Aunt Jane ought to find a home in our house "till she gets a house of her own, Sophy. I would not for the world she were turned from our house like a homeless beggar! Take her in, by all means," he exclaimed; "you can stand her, Sophy! but I can't; so I am off to Scotland this very night." And he vowed he would go raving mad if he stayed another hour at Sherbrook Hall. "With your Aunt Jane on the one hand, and Mrs Stewart on the other, I am pretty far gone as it is!"

There could be no doubt this was the best arrangement possible under our peculiar circumstances, yet I was very loth to acknowledge it. I could hardly bring myself to part from David. We had only been married a month! I was filled with a vague dread, with a kind of superstitious terror that separation would break the spell of our happiness. David pooh-poohed the notion, called it stuff and nonsense, and declared if I did not let him go to Scotland, I should have to send him into a lunatic asylum instead.

In the fear and pain of parting from him, I forgot Aunt Jane and all I owed her: so that I were with

my husband, I no longer cared if she were left alone. To David's amazement, and indeed dismay, I implored him to take me with him.

I then discovered I must have drawn a more vivid picture of Aunt Jane's forsaken state, and must have painted selfish ingratitude in blacker hues, than I had imagined. We are most eloquent when we try to over-persuade ourselves as well as others ! and in talking to David, it was myself as well as he I had tried to move. I found I had entirely succeeded in convincing him I should be nothing short of an unnatural monster if I forsook Aunt Jane in her powerless ruin and her sorrow. He repeated to me what I had said to him, and it was impossible for me to contradict my own words—because they were my own !

David ended by saying much what he had said before. " Your aunt cannot be left alone with a set of harpies. It would be a disgrace to us both if we abandoned her, and I quite see we must offer her a home until she gets into a house of her own. By Jove ! I should stay with her myself if I could stand her ! but I can't stand her, Sophy, and you can—you can stand all sorts of peculiar people. I declare you were quite fond of your uncle,—by Jove, you were ! You must stay. It is your duty to stay, and I shall be back again as soon as ever you have put your aunt into a house of her own. When I am bidding her good-bye, I will tell her she must leave Sherbrook immediately ; but I won't tell her till the trap is at

the door, not I! for she will be sure to weep abundantly, and say I ought not to go shooting while I am in deep mourning! That's the point she will fix on! I would bet ten to one she will fix on that! though all the world knows a man is never considered to be in too deep mourning to amuse himself. It is quite different with a lady — quite! So I declare, Sophy, it is just as well you are staying on here, if only for the look of the thing, People would be scandalised if you went travelling and visiting about with me so soon after your uncle's death. By Jove, they would!"

David was packed up and ready to start before Aunt Jane could be brought to believe he had any intention of going. I no longer tried to keep him. I believed it was best for him to go, and best for me to stay; still I could not say good-bye to him without tears. We had only been married a month!

When he saw me cry, he was moved to sympathy, and vowed he would not leave me. He called himself a wretch for leaving me. There was the ring of true affection in the relenting love he showed me.

I could have kept him then had I willed it, but I was ashamed of my own weakness. My heart grieved to think my selfish tears should keep poor David, and doom him to be maddened by Aunt Jane and Mrs Stewart.

So I made him go, and showed him I could say good-bye and not weep again. His melting kindness

had filled me with a joy which let me smile to him as he drove away.

When David was gone and far from me, I continued to see him as he looked to me in the warmth of our last embrace. I never saw him grow cold towards me, or become forgetful of my love.

CHAPTER VI.

AUNT JANE'S state of feeling towards Mrs Stewart was strange indeed. She complained to me of Catherine's conduct, she bewailed it, she cried over it. I heartily agreed in condemning it. She forthwith praised the admirable Catherine—her labour in the Lord's vineyard, her tatting, her sound doctrine,—“so different from yours, Sophy!”—her indefatigable, energetic nature. “Catherine works like a devoted slave, and she says it is a great bother taking this inventory, but she does it all for Gordon-Sherbrook's sake, because it seems he is very particular, and would be very angry if a single spoon were lost, though it might only be a tea-spoon, and I had no idea till Catherine told me that Gordon-Sherbrook was so particular about the spoons, and about everything, and I am sure Catherine would give me a great many things, only for Gordon-Sherbrook; but I think perhaps she will ask Gordon-Sherbrook to let me have the teapot with the bear's-head spout, and you may say what you like, Sophy, I know Catherine will ask him. I know she

will ! She is not like you, Sophy, who will never ask for anything."

I had twice refused to beg this teapot for Aunt Jane ; I now saw she was determined to ask for it herself. She declared it was the only teapot in the whole world which made really good tea. Her love for it and her desire to have it were so strong, that I spoke to a deaf person when I tried to make her understand the intense humiliation there would be for her in asking a gift of Mrs Stewart. I told her, too, she would ask in vain—but I was mistaken.

Next day I met my aunt crossing the lobby with the beloved teapot held between both hands. She was in an odd state of joy and triumph, and cried out to me—" I told you, Sophy, I knew Catherine would let me have the teapot with the bear's-head spout, but you always contradict everybody, though the instant I asked her, Catherine immediately said she was quite sure Gordon-Sherbrook would give me my own teapot, as I was so very, very much attached to it, and that if he objected afterwards, Catherine said she would buy him a new one, for that he could not be as fond of the bear's-head spout as I was ; and Catherine quite understood my affection, and was not at all angry with me, for Catherine does not hate me, Sophy, because of poor dear Edward's will. Catherine really is a most excellent, Christian - minded, indefatigable creature ! and she says she knows Gordon-Sherbrook has the Lord's blessing, and will multiply the talent intrusted to his care ; and Catherine says she would like to give

me the four dancing-bear muffineers, but she cannot give away anything more belonging to Gordon-Sherbrook."

My pride blushed for Aunt Jane. I felt acute pain on her account, and, belonging to her as I did, it was with a deep sense of shame that I next met Mrs Stewart. For a wonder, I happened to find myself alone with the admirable Catherine. I think she understood my humiliation, and liked it: she fixed her clear-sighted eye upon me,—“Sophy,” she said, “you are not pleased Mrs Sherbrook should have begged this piece of plate from me; and you are surprised I gave it to her.” I noticed she did not mention Gordon-Sherbrook’s name, but said, “I gave it to her.”

“Mrs Stewart,” I replied, “we have never mystified each other with insincere speeches.”

“True enough, Sophy! And should you like to know why I gave it to her?” she asked.

I said that I would. “You had weighed it,” I added, “and you knew its value.”

“I gave it to her, Sophy,” she answered quietly, “because I intend your aunt to speak well of me when she leaves this house: I do not intend you to have all the talk to yourself. I mean her to contradict your story to your face; so perhaps, Sophy, you may find it wiser to hold your tongue. I have told you the exact truth.”

Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart is certainly no ordinary person, for she is a liar who can tell the truth, and a hypocrite who can be sincere. The fact is, she is not

a hypocrite by taste and instinct, only by calculation. She is a domineering, ordering woman, who fawns on no one except for the sake of some clearly defined interest of her own. She is not a liar where the truth can serve as well—still less where it serves better.

The words I have just repeated were the only ones which passed directly between Mrs Stewart and me until the night before I left Sherbrook Hall.

I hardly saw the admirable Catherine except at meals. She spent most mornings shut up with Mr Buggle in the study, and the rest of her time she was busy taking that everlasting inventory. She even went down into the stable for a day or two, and took an exhaustive inventory there, which somehow or other resulted in Robert's dismissal. She and Robert had never quite hit it off together; and Robert was not a Snipkins!

I do not think I exaggerate in saying that Aunt Jane's mind was appalled by the dismissal of Robert. I fancy Robert had always seemed more like a master than a servant to her—he had appeared to drive the bay mare at his own pace by an unquestioned right.

When Mrs Stewart sent Robert away, Aunt Jane felt her to be all-powerful: she felt that even in "poor dear Edward's" lifetime her own power had never reached such a height as this. She spoke of "Catherine" with a sort of awe. She feared her. My aunt excited my most intense contempt by declaring she never would do anything which ever could make Catherine really angry. I had asked her to send for

James Sherbrook, or else to go and see him and Mary and the children, and bid them all good-bye before she left, and this was her answer—"Catherine would not like it! Catherine would not let James come into the house! I am sure she would not! and I never will do anything, Sophy, which could ever make Catherine really angry."

When she said this, I turned from her in uncontrollable disgust. I walked straight out of the house off to the Rectory. I confess as I went along that I felt keen pleasure in knowing I was doing the one thing Mrs Stewart would most dislike me to do.

My visit to the Rectory moved me—it gave me both pleasure and great pain. I had always been fond of James Sherbrook, yet I had liked and pitied rather than respected him. I had thought him—what no doubt he is—a weak man, too easily led. But now I felt he had the delicacy, the dignity of a high-bred gentleman, and the kindly goodness of a really religious man, and I respected him.

He asked no question it might be awkward for me to answer; he made no allusion to the last time we had met; he never mentioned my uncle's will. He betrayed no disappointment, no pique, but he looked broken down, like a man who had received a shock. His look grieved me. He asked most kindly for Aunt Jane, and offered to go and see her and read to her. Mary seemed astonished at my bungling, excusing refusal, but the kind Rector tried to make even my refusal easy.

The simple Mary appeared to understand nothing. I do not think Uncle Sherbrook's will had been any surprise or disappointment to her. I quite think she had never realised her husband was the natural heir, or indeed had never cast a thought upon such hazy distances as future prospects. After the sight of Mrs Stewart's hawk-eyed rapacity, it pleased me to behold such guilelessness. There was a beauty, an illusion about it,—a sort of poetry which touched me, although I was forced to admit had Mary been cleverer, she could not have been so blind. I knew it was partly the total absence of talent which enabled the present hour to shut out those future days when her boys could have no chance in life because they had no money.

I do not believe the Rector was more worldly than she, but he was cleverer, so the anxieties of their two lives and of their children's were his. I saw this, and I felt for him.

His careworn face haunted me after I had left the rectory. I realised intensely the cruel injustice of my uncle's will. I hoped some one might soon die and leave the poor clergyman a fortune, for I knew if I died myself I should now leave my money to David. During my walk homewards I did my best to invent expectations for James Sherbrook. I bethought myself of Jack Jones.

I rested sitting upon the milestone just outside the village, and tried hard to weave a hope for the Rector's children. It was difficult for me to do so, because

I am convinced hardly any one who wants money gets it: the poor are heirs to poverty.

I was startled from my thoughts by the near approach, by the actual presence, of Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone. She came striding along the middle of the road with two pugs at her heels, a dog-whip in one hand, and some kind of large parcel under one arm. Her high-stepping action was remarkable. She covered no end of ground,—in a stride she was before me. She stopped short. Her eyeglass was in her eye. “Oh, Sophy!” she said.

“Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone,” said I, getting up.

There was a dead stop between us—her short manner invariably silenced me. She appeared to rummage her brain for another remark. With an effort and a start it came at last. “Taking worsted-work to the rectory!” she remarked.

“Unsound upholstery? Very High Church?” I inquired.

“You’re so awfully Low, Sophy! awfully! No patience with you!” she exclaimed; “all comes of your being shut up with a pack of dowdy old Thunderbore Methodists! Soon change if you went into society! Soon find no one worth knowing is Low Church. Low Church shocking bad form nowadays!” This was said with that air of self-satisfied conceit with which fashion speaks of the unfashionable. “Believe me, Sophy, it quite cnts a young lady out of society to have the views of a Low Church dowdy. Might as

*scribbled in an Mster & a pot har,
on the 11th Dec 1840*

well talk like your maiden great-aunt, or wear one of last year's gowns ! ”

I did not know whether to be more surprised at the length or at the social theology of this speech. I was astonished at both ! Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone did not seem to have another word left her. She whistled to the pugs, cracked the dog-whip, gave me one nod of her head, and was in motion, shoulders, hips, and all. Suddenly she wheeled right-about-left, and held out her hand. “ Good-bye, Sophy,” she cried ; “ hear you are going to leave the county immediately. Won't see you again before you go ! Good-bye ! Dare say we will meet again somewhere some day ? ” Jumping Georgy was in marching trim, but wheeled round a second time, exclaiming “ Forgot your aunt ! Hear she's off too ! Say good-bye to her for me.”

“ No ; Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone ! ” I said, and she could not have said it more abruptly with her own lips—“ No, I won't ! ”

She put down her eyeglass ; she put it up ; she put it down ; she put it up ; she fixed it upon me, and looked as much surprised by my short, rude answer as if she herself had been the most graciously polite lady in Europe. She examined me curiously. At last she said—“ Don't understand you, Sophy ! ”

“ Do you not understand that you might come yourself, Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone,” I replied, “ and bid Aunt Jane good-bye ? A visit from you,” I added, more softly, “ would be an event to her, and so would

excite her mind, and turn it a little from her great unhappiness."

Jumping Georgy reflected, hesitated, and then exclaimed—"Should not know what to say to her! Never much cared for Mr Sherbrook!" She spoke the exact truth. I was sure of it. I saw that instinct told her she had not enough imagination to conceive feelings she could not share. I did her the credit to believe that could she have imagined Aunt Jane's sorrow, she would have gone to her and sympathised with her. She repeated—"Would not know what to say!" She attempted to make no other excuse, but remarked—"Rigardy went to the funeral, and invited the whole county, and did all that was right and proper, you know."

From her manner she evidently expected me to reply—"So kind of your husband!" Yet I said nothing; not that I thought it unkind of Rigardy-Wrenstone, but I felt he had done so principally from the love of being first, no matter where. I knew him to have been born a master of the ceremonies, with a taste for doing the honours and issuing invitations to county magnates and grandees. I firmly held my tongue. I was as sincere with Jumping Georgy as she was with me. Finding I gave her no answer, she whistled to the pugs and marched on.

I was far from disliking Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone, though she could alarm and silence me. I had seen so much humbug in my life, that I liked her none

the worse, but the better, for not feigning to have what she really had not. The pity lay in her not having imagination of either heart or mind.

It was not her fault that she wanted imagination. She had been created without it, so why blame her when nature had not given it to her? I did not blame her. I only thought it a pity imagination for the feelings and individuality of others should ever be forgotten in a good woman's composition. Thus thinking, I watched Jumping Georgy striding along. As my eyes followed her, I became convinced this nondescript person is not a woman at all. Jumping Georgy is a sincere and perfectly well-behaved young man, who neither drinks, smokes, nor gambles. Jumping Georgy sold out of the army on his marriage, but still holds military rank, retaining also for life the short manner of a commanding officer.

It was late in the afternoon when I returned to Sherbrook from my visit to the rectory. To my surprise, I found Mrs Stewart sitting with Aunt Jane in the drawing-room. The indefatigable Catherine had never sat there since my uncle's death. She had been too fully occupied elsewhere all day long, and every day—even upon the blessed Sabbath, though doubtless it was only an inventory of Dr MacShaw's works which this strict Sabbatarian took upon the seventh day.

Mrs Stewart was resting in Uncle Sherbrook's arm-chair, with her feet cocked up on the lower rim of the

calico stool. She was tatting leisurely, and counting her loops at her ease. It was years since I had seen her tatt so quietly.

"Poor, dear Catherine, she has finished that bothersome inventory!" cried Aunt Jane, quite forgetting to ask where I had been; "poor, dear, excellent, indefatigable creature! Congratulate her, Sophy; congratulate her!"

I said nothing, and Catherine took no notice of my presence, but continued tatting as before, neither faster nor slower.

At dinner she tatted between the courses, and was in no hurry to leave the table. She sat on, and entertained Aunt Jane with edifying tales of the Christian Cossack. We had this same Cossack off and on during the evening, and a tract from the handbag as well.

The kindness, the agreeability, the soundness, the thoughtfulness, the excellence of that poor, dear, Christian-minded, indefatigable creature, Catherine Sherbrook-Stewart, enraptured my aunt. Aunt Jane rated Catherine's civility thus highly, because it was such a long time since this lady had gone to the trouble of talking to her, or of having the ordinary good manners of society towards her. It is a fact in life—a common truism—that nine people out of ten prize the occasional unexpected civility of a person habitually neglectful and rude, twice as much as they do the unvarying kindness of one whom they can always count upon, and even snub if they please.

The climax of excellence was reached when Cathe-

rine lighted Aunt Jane's bedroom candle, and carried it up-stairs herself. She had never done this since Uncle Sherbrook's death. She used to do it regularly before. I had done it every evening in her stead, as a matter of course, but naturally enough had never received any thanks; yet Aunt Jane could not now find words to express her inordinate gratitude and her fears lest dear Catherine might have dropped some grease upon her gown!

By Mrs Stewart's own order, Snipkins was in waiting to undress my aunt.

"Good-night!" exclaimed Aunt Jane, embracing her Catherine with warm gratitude; "God bless you for being kind to me! Poor dear Edward would be glad to know you are kind to me. God bless you, Catherine!" There was something touching in the way my unfortunate aunt said these words. They made Snipkins look a little ashamed, I thought, and very much astonished.

Mrs Stewart had no look but that of self-satisfied success. The orthodox intriguer, who for many years has mixed up Providence successfully in all her little arrangements, I believe really does become convinced she has the blessing of the Almighty upon her plots and plans. It is a strange state of mind, but conscience dies surely in the self-righteous woman who learns to think she can do no successful wrong. The utmost she can imagine is that others may not consider her altogether in the right, so she takes precautions to look well in their sight, if they are people

whose good opinion is of marketable value. Otherwise she takes none.

With a second embrace and another "God bless you!" my aunt and her Catherine parted for the night; and I went my way to my own room, wondering what new little plan Mrs Stewart could have in her head,—for I felt perfectly certain this sudden effort of civility towards my aunt was no trouble taken in vain.

The puzzle was not fated to be long an unravelled mystery. Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart was following me, and I found her in my room almost at the same moment with myself. "You must be surprised to see me here, and at this hour of the night," she said in a pleased, elated sort of manner; "but you will be still more surprised, Sophy, when you hear what I have to say."

"No, Mrs Stewart," I replied; "nothing you could ever do or say would surprise me. The only certainty I ever feel about you is, that you have certainly got some unlooked-for little arrangement or design on hand."

This speech of mine did not offend Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart; on the contrary, I think it actually pleased her. There are two distinct races of clever, intriguing women. She is of the species who like to be thought even more cunning and deeper than they are; for in her estimation, talent and occult management are one and the same thing.

"Very well, Sophy," she exclaimed; "delighted to

hear you are prepared for everything! I suppose you are all packed up and quite ready to leave this to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning?" I cried; and notwithstanding all I had just said, I am sure I looked what I really was, greatly astonished.

Mrs Stewart was in high glee. "For a person," she remarked, "who cannot be astonished at anything, I think you look just a little surprised."

"Indeed," I answered, "I spoke rashly, for you have surprised me."

"I expect a letter from Malta to-morrow morning," continued Mrs Stewart; "and unless it gives better news of Gordon-Sherbrook, I am off myself to-morrow night."

"The letter," said I, "will certainly come, and the bad news also, for the inventory is finished. You have the knack of convenient accidents, Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart."

She received this remark without comment or visible annoyance. My good opinion was no longer of any marketable value whatever, so she then and there unfolded the whole of her little plan to me. There was no beating about the bush. She stated her intentions clearly and firmly. She had every little detail beautifully arranged beforehand. Aunt Jane was to leave by the twelve o'clock train from Votlingham, and Mr Buggle was to tell her she must go. "He can easily make her believe it would be illegal for her to remain here any longer. She believes in him, and she is

mortally afraid of him. The more he terrifies her the better, for the quieter she will go. And go she must! Snipkins has packed up all her clothes without her knowledge. Snipkins has been packing them for the last week."

"The shock of this sudden wrench may kill my poor aunt," said I.

"Not a bit of it," cried Mrs Stewart—"not a bit of it. She will just cry and scream, but nobody ever died of crying." She looked angry. I had at last displeased her. "Sophy," she added, "had Mrs Sherbrook left my son's house in proper time, she would not have waited until she received her notice to quit."

These words brought all the blood in my veins into my cheeks, to blush there for Aunt Jane. "Have pity on my aunt's weakness, Mrs Stewart," was all I could say; "it is hard for her to leave her home. She is old; she is helpless; sorrow has overpowered the little mind and courage she ever had. She has not nerve to bear fresh grief."

Mrs Stewart's hard words and harder manner had revived the pity and sympathy for Aunt Jane which had almost died in my own heart. I actually pleaded my aunt's cause with Mrs Stewart. I begged a reprieve for her, so that she might get accustomed to the idea of leaving—so that the shock might not quite unhinge her mind. I begged three days more for her; I begged two; I begged one; but I could not even get an hour.

"Mrs Sherbrook must leave to-morrow morning," said Mrs Stewart, decidedly; "she must and shall leave, because I am going myself in the afternoon, and I am determined not to let her remain one single hour in this house behind me. Some of the plate might be missing if I did, and then I should have some unpleasant lawsuit with her afterwards."

"You treat her like a thief, and in the house which so long was her own," said I, indignantly.

"Yes," said Mrs Stewart, quietly; "I do. Good-night, Sophy. I have said all I want to say."

"Good-night, Mrs Stewart, and the Lord bless you for being so kind to my poor aunt, now that my uncle is dead. The Lord bless you, Mrs Stewart!"

I thought myself cutting and satirical when I said this, but the admirable Catherine only smiled, as if it gave her positive pleasure to recall Aunt Jane's words. There seemed to be no shame for her in their guileless trust.

CHAPTER VII.

“BUGGLE has managed her beautifully!” cried Mrs Stewart, with frisky delight; “no one could have been cleverer or more judicious than he! Your aunt is as quiet as a child, and is letting herself be dressed by Snipkins in the hall. She does not even want to walk up-stairs again, or fuss about in any way. I believe she fancies one of her legs is stiff, and so much the better! If we are only quick now, we shall get her off before the crying fit comes on. It is sure to come sooner or later. Lock up your trunk this instant, Sophy. The carriage is actually at the door, and Thomas and William are waiting to take down the luggage.” And Mrs Stewart tripped away cheerfully to put on her own bonnet and cloak—for, much against my will, she had firmly determined to accompany us to the station, and see the very last of us. She would come; nothing could prevent her.

I found my aunt seated in the hall upon one of the crested oak chairs. She was dressed, and Snipkins had just given her her gloves. I saw her hands were trembling, so that she could not put them on. Her

head was shaking too. She seemed irritated at not being able to put on the gloves easily. Snipkins helped her, and pulled them on and buttoned them. Aunt Jane then sat staring at her hands, as if puzzled to see the gloves. She was silent, except to ask every few minutes—"When do you say we are going, Snipkins?"

"This moment, ma'am; the carriage is at the door."

"Oh!" said Aunt Jane, and her brow knitted, as if it were an effort to grasp the meaning of Snipkins's answer. Then again, in another minute, "When are we going? When are we going, Snipkins?"

"The carriage is at the door, ma'am. You are going now."

"Oh!" repeated my aunt, and her face grew calmer; but the troubled expression soon returned, and the question, "Are we going away to-day, Snipkins? When are we going away?"

"O Lor', ma'am! Lor'!" cried the maid; "Hi've told you hover and hover hagain, and you don't seem to understand, like."

"Tell me again, Snipkins," said my poor aunt; "I won't ask you any more questions, but tell me again!"

"You are going now, ma'am, you are going now! The carriage is at the door." Snipkins did not speak crossly; on the contrary. I looked at her with surprise, for I thought there was pity in her voice.

"Snipkins," cried my aunt, after a moment's

pause,—“Snipkins, what did you say about the carriage?”

At this Snipkins seemed awestruck. She clasped her hands, and exclaimed, “My poor lady! my poor lady!” This exclamation appeared to bother Aunt Jane’s troubled mind: the puzzle of it irritated her exceedingly, and turning to me, she said, in a tone of querulous provocation, “Snipkins won’t answer me when I speak to her. Sophy, what did she say about the carriage?”

“She told you the carriage is here;” and I drew near to my aunt, and put my arm around her. “Come, come, Aunt Jane,” I said, coaxingly; “come, dear, we are going for a drive.”

“A drive?” she repeated—“a drive?” And she bothered over the idea, as if it clashed with some other vague notion in her mind.

“Come!” said I, helping her to rise. I forced a smile, and added, “Aunt Jane, you know we must not keep ~~the~~ horses waiting,—the bay mare will catch cold.”

The familiar words, those old, old acquaintances, found their way to her understanding. She immediately rose in excited haste and crossed the hall, leaning her whole weight heavily upon my arm. I perceived with a pity which drowned every other regretful, grieving thought within me, that she was just a little paralysed—she dragged one leg: this, then, was the stiff leg the admirable Catherine had mentioned so cheerfully! I supposed my aunt must

herself have spoken of it to Mrs Stewart, and that she must therefore have felt her own helplessness. If this had been so once, she had now forgotten it. Her weakness did not trouble her. She appeared not even to be aware of it, but tried to hurry on, exclaiming that Robert would be annoyed if the bay mare caught cold.

When Snipkins heard my aunt speak of Robert, as if he had never gone away, and were still her own coachman, I think she considered her mistress to be in a state of appalling, hopeless lunacy. To forget Robert's dismissal, was of all lapses of memory the one best calculated forcibly to impress the lady's-maid's imagination; and it is a fact that something very like remorse was written on the woman's frightened face. This look prompted me to say, "Snipkins, you have helped to bring about this misery."

"Why are you speaking to Snipkins?" asked Aunt Jane, petulantly. "She is very cross, and won't answer me when I speak to her." My aunt was helped into the carriage, repeating, "I won't speak to Snipkins! I won't speak to her! Tell her to go away, Sophy. I can't understand her. She irritates me! she irritates me! Tell her to go away, Sophy. Robert!" she cried, "drive on! drive on!" But the new coachman had received other orders, and did not move.

I explained to Aunt Jane that we were waiting for Mrs Stewart; and she surprised me by getting very angry, and declaring over and over again that

Catherine was always late, and always kept her waiting, and that she could not bear to wait,—she could not bear it! The only clear consciousness my aunt now seemed to have, was an overpowering desire to start off and be gone. Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart was not long in coming, yet Aunt Jane had time to work herself into quite a passion—she even began to reproach Catherine, and in unmeasured language. But the best of women was not going to put up with any nonsense of this sort! In one instant she had silenced Aunt Jane,—more by her voice and eye, it is true, than by her actual words.

Snipkins had followed Mrs Stewart to the carriage-door, and I imagined, by her Christian lady's express command. Perhaps the admirable Catherine did not consider it looked well for George and Thomas and William to see Aunt Jane part from her confidential maid in anger, for I fancied that Mrs Stewart had not yet quite shaken off the fear of a possible lawsuit, and to a person fearing a family lawsuit, servants' evidence is of nervous importance—it is so apt to tell the wrong way.

Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart pressed Aunt Jane's arm, and said firmly, "Shake hands with Snipkins." My aunt obeyed mechanically, and we drove on.

Aunt Jane had left her home for ever!

She was silent, and her knitted brow betokened the effort she made to understand the bewilderment she was conscious of: at length she asked, wonderingly, what could have made Snipkins cry?

"Snipkins is an idiot!" muttered Mrs Stewart, irritably. My aunt was bewildered and silent again. Then shortly, with suddenly renewed excitement, she repeated the former question—"Catherine, why was Snipkins crying?"

"Because you are going away from her, Mrs Sherbrook. Poor Snipkins! She is very soft-hearted!"

"Oh, Catherine! Catherine!" cried my aunt, and a look of abject fear crossed her face; "where, where are you taking me?"

"I am not taking you anywhere, Mrs Sherbrook," replied Catherine, testily; "you are going of your own accord. You are going to London."

I heard my aunt say over to herself, "London? Yes; I am going to London." Yet in no time, the idea she had grasped melted in her mind, and she asked again anxiously, "Where am I going, Catherine?"

I quite dreaded Mrs Stewart's reply. I expected she would snub my poor aunt unmercifully, for teasing her so soon again with a question she had only just had the trouble of answering. What then was my surprise to see her face light up, not with anger, but with a look of cheerful satisfaction! She nodded her head at me, as much as to say—I see we shall have no trouble with her; she is just muddled enough to make things easy. And laughing, she exclaimed, "My dear Mrs Sherbrook, where are your brains? Why, I have only just told you that you are going to London, and you have forgotten it already!"

"I remember now, I remember," said my aunt. Her Catherine's cheerful enjoyment of the present hour seemed to allay her undefined anxiety, and she listened tranquilly, while Mrs Stewart dilated on the beauty of the weather, and on the autumn tints, and on the fine appearance of the beeches near the avenue gate. The best of women surveyed the whole demesne with the eye of pleased possession—although, I reflected, the place does not yet belong to her.

My aunt remained quiet and speechless until the last gate of her old home had closed behind her, and then she grew strangely excited. Her tearless eyes stared blankly from her troubled face; her head trembled violently; she spoke oddly, with the thick utterance of a dried-up tongue. "Catherine," she cried, "where am I going? I can't remember! I can't remember!"

Mrs Stewart told her she was going to London, but the answer no more appeased her agitation. The question was again repeated, and again. Really this was too much of a good thing! The admirable Catherine waxed impatient, and spoke harshly; still the question was repeated, though nervously, almost with terror. "Catherine, Catherine, where am I going?" My aunt raised her trembling hands, and implored Mrs Stewart to tell her—"Be kind to me, Catherine, and tell me! tell me! Tell me this once, because I can't remember."

This recurring annoyance was no joke. There must be an end to it, for Mrs Stewart could stand it no

longer! So in her bitterest tone of voice, she told my aunt to hold her tongue, and not to worry any more. The sound of Catherine's hard words and voice effectually silenced Aunt Jane. By degrees she lapsed into an abject and imbecile sort of stupefied feebleness. The trembling of her head and hand increased. Her fallen jaw gave her a silly look, and she drivelled a little; she seemed nervously aware of this sad childish shame; it appeared to irritate her; she became engrossed by it, and used her handkerchief constantly.

Oh! the weakness of her debased state. Oh! the pitiful weakness of it. It was then that I loved Aunt Jane as I had never loved her before—as I never could have loved her, had I not seen her in that debasing sort of grief which appeals to our love and to our mercy (if we have any in our soul!), with that same kind of agonising eloquence with which a friend-abandoned wretch from some abyss of human misery appeals to the mercy and the love of God.

Only once, and for a moment, did my aunt's excitement return. I felt her shaking hand upon my knee, and heard her whisper timidly, "Where are we going, Sophy?"

"You are coming with me Aunt Jane," I replied; "we are going home together." And I kept the trembling hand in mine. The gentle pressure soothed my aunt; the acquiescing stupefaction took possession of her again, and continued all those long miles till we reached Votlingham.

Mrs Stewart had settled we were not to take the train at Harefield, as usual, but at Votlingham. She had done so, I was certain, because she feared villagers and friends, perhaps even Mary and the Rector, might assemble at the nearer station and bid Aunt Jane a last good-bye. Now as the admirable Catherine could not possibly foretell what kind of despair her dear Mrs Sherbrook would be in, I think she dreaded some awkward scene calculated to make a noise—a noise which might perhaps re-echo in the county.

When we arrived at Votlingham, and the carriage stopped, Aunt Jane shrunk instinctively from Catherine Stewart, and wanted to take my arm. The weakness in her leg made it impossible for her to walk alone; but the determined Catherine pushed me aside roughly enough, and peremptorily ordered my aunt to lean upon her. Aunt Jane obeyed.

Sir John Moultrie and one or two other acquaintances happened to be standing on the station platform. Aunt Jane knew Sir John, and held out her hand to him, yet when he spoke to her she could not answer him. The admirable Catherine answered for her, and with much visible feeling. But Mrs Stewart did not let emotion quite overpower her; she bestirred herself, and became so thoughtful for Aunt Jane's comfort! so good-natured in the sight of those observing county people! Altogether, Mrs Stewart was enabled, I daresay she thought providentially enabled, to cover herself with glory at the Votlingham station. She

got a carriage for us all to ourselves, and I actually saw her give the guard a two-shilling-piece to prevent his admitting any one else. She must have been terribly afraid we might travel up to town with Sir John Moultrie, or she would never have given the guard two shillings!

In the twinkling of an eye, the best of women transformed the carriage she had secured for us into a first-class widow's compartment. She pulled down all the blinds, and quickly buried Aunt Jane where no one could see her.

As I alone saw the final separation behind those closed curtains, I alone knew that Aunt Jane parted from her devoted friend without even saying good-bye to her. The last farewell was not omitted in anger, but in forgetfulness. The clever Catherine was careful not to rouse my aunt from lethargy by any word of hers.

Who could ever have foretold Aunt Jane and Mrs Stewart would have parted in silence, without one single word? Yet how often in life is the real fact thus curiously the contrary of what beforehand would seem the certain and inevitable.

Mrs Stewart and I also parted in silence. Aunt Jane did not appear to realise where she was, or that the train was starting till it had actually started. The feverish anxiety to know where she was going returned with the motion of the train, but did not last very long: her excitement died from the weariness of trying to understand what her mind could not

grasp. So, little by little, she again fell into the apathy of unreasoning weakness.

As I gazed at my poor aunt with an awestricken, pitying heart, during that, to me, never-ending journey, I came to think that perhaps this stroke of paralysis was a great mercy,—a mercy sent her to dull the pain of parting from her home by the God whom Aunt Jane had truly, if queerly, served in happier days.

In our youth, at the age when we believe in the happiness of life, we look forward to the enfeebling illnesses of old age, especially to paralysis, with a mixture of horror and upbraiding rebellion against God's providence. Yet often, often, thought I, the unreasoning weakness must prove a friend sent by a merciful God. I could now understand how a clouded memory might even be the aged's best earthly friend. A sad friend, it is true; yet suited to a sad season, when other friends are dead or changed to us, and clear remembrance is but a sorrow.

CHAPTER VIII.

AUNT JANE had not been many days in Montagu Square before she recovered a certain sort of memory, a recollection not overmuch muddled for her, of poor dear Sophia, of poor dear Sophia's habit of never taking anybody's advice, of Sophy's very faulty education. In short, a remembrance of old times generally was brought back to her by the sight of the familiar rooms, by the associations of the house, where she had not been "for . . . for . . . for how many years, Sophy?" I had to repeat the exact number to her twenty times a-day. Numbers and the clear sense of time could find no abiding-place in her poor brain. Old times seemed to have come near to her, while nearer years and months, and the weeks which touched the very day whose minutes she was living, were hazy distances.

Those last hours at Sherbrook Hall were a dream ; a dream, too, which soon went the misty way of dreams, and was forgotten. A childish terror of the attorney Buggle, and an undefined dread of Mrs Stewart, alone stood out from the bewilderment of that nightmare ;

and yet at times Aunt Jane would wonder where "Catherine" was, and why she did not come and see her. "Catherine is not really angry with me, Sophy, because you see she gave me the silver teapot which I use every day, and used even that morning when you said I was tired and made me stay in bed for breakfast, so I do wonder why Catherine does not come to see me, and, Sophy, I wonder where Catherine is?"

I would tell her Mrs Stewart had gone to Malta to see her son who was dying—who, indeed, was all but dead. Aunt Jane would then remember Gordon-Sherbrook's lungs, and would wonder if Catherine arrived in time to see the poor young man still alive, and she would hope Catherine did, and greatly fear she did not. To which, having a very strong conviction on the subject, I invariably answered, "Mrs Stewart has arrived in time, Aunt Jane. I am sure she has! She would take very good care not to arrive too late. Mrs Stewart would certainly arrive in time, in plenty of time, to make Gordon-Sherbrook's will."

"Sophy, you always say that, you know you do, and I cannot make out what you mean."

My poor aunt would look so painfully puzzled, that I would instantly change the conversation; yet if she returned to the former question, I could not refrain from giving the same answer. "Mrs Stewart will certainly arrive in time to make Gordon-Sherbrook's will." Once when I had said this, Aunt Jane cried out, "Will? will? Sophy, was not there a mistake

in somebody's will? Sophy, Sophy, tell me! I can't remember!" I parried the question as best I could, and soothed my aunt's suddenly awakened excitement by leading her quickly to a new idea: the fresh one swept the last away. There was no resisting grip as yet within her mind to grasp a thought and keep it. Only for the teapot with the bear's-head spout, she never would have asked so often about Mrs Stewart, but the sight of that teapot always brought back "Catherine" to her memory.

Had she seen Mr Buggle again, I think it likely she would have remembered about her husband's will,—that is, indeed, if the terror of their last interview at Sherbrook Hall had not stifled former associations; for it is just possible the attorney's presence, by reviving the dead memory of those last hours spent in her old home, might recall nothing but that one agitation; and if that one, therefore none other. Aunt Jane's mind could now hold but one idea at a time. If excited, she became the prey, not of many fears and worries, but of one. One convulsing, irritating trouble would absorb her to itself. It would take possession of her like a tyrant who allows no power to reign beside his own.

The doctor I had privately consulted about my aunt told me to amuse her, and on no account to let her get excited. He said excitement might produce another attack, and be very dangerous. If she were kept quiet, he had a good opinion of her case, and he said she would almost recover the use of her leg. He

told me an attack like hers was the commonest effect of a shock upon elderly people ; so common, indeed, did he seem to consider it, that I don't think he took much interest in the case. I was to send for him instantly if she got another stroke. Nothing ever gave me so great an idea of the misery a doctor in large practice in London must see, as the quite-natural, altogether-to-be-expected way, this man took my aunt's sad state.

aye I could not grow accustomed to poor Aunt Jane's senile weakness, though I lived with her day by day and all day long. The fallen jaw, the shifting and no longer infallible upper lip, the trembling head, the still shaking hand, pained me like a new pain each day. And it was well her look thus affected me. It kept pity, ~~ay~~, and love, alive in the heart, which only for the sight of her would have been worried to death, because the stronger Aunt Jane became in health the more irritable did she grow in temper. Poor thing ! returning memory only made her grieve the more after her old home, her old habits, Snipkins and the servants "who knew her ways," Robert and the horses. She regretted all she had lost. At times her spirits were wofully depressed, and she would seem to feel degraded by the loss of fortune, house, and servants.

I hired a house for her two doors from my own in Montagu Square, but she would take no interest in it. She was even rather huffy about it, and said she did not like it as well as mine, and seemed to think I wanted to get rid of her, and kept on repeating irritably that there surely was no hurry for David's return.

I was becoming rather frightened to see my aunt preferred living with me to living in a house of her own. She liked to have me always with her, and liked me to keep on dropping little remarks to her all day long, and half the night, so as to enable her to talk incessantly herself, for she could no longer turn on her own axis unless you set her going every now and then.

I had hoped the furnishing of the new house would amuse her. She was so difficult to amuse! But she did not care for new furniture now. She longed too intensely after the old Sherbrook chairs, and "the round table, Sophy, which always was in the middle of the drawing-room; and, Sophy, you will never find another table like that one, because it had only one straight leg and a round thing at the bottom, with casters underneath; and all the other tables I have ever seen have three sort of claws, and no round thing at the bottom. No, Sophy! no! I can't go and see the table you speak of, for I am sure it has claws; besides, I should catch my death of cold in that shop. I know I should, because I always get my feet wet everywhere except just on the pavement round this square, for the pavement is very dry in this square, though I must say it is drier in this house than in front of the one you have taken for me; so I like this house the best, because I think the soil is much drier, and there is a very great difference in soils; and poor dear Snipkins" — (by some unaccountable process, Snipkins had gradually become a *poor dear*!) — "and poor dear Snipkins," continued my aunt, "who was

front of

always so attentive to me, and had her Bible at her finger-ends, and knew all my little ways, and never gave me my cuffs before my collar. Poor dear Snipkins! and I wonder where she is, Sophy? And I wonder if she has gone to Malta with Catherine . . .” My aunt sighed and shed a tear. “I . . . wonder . . . what was I saying, Sophy? What was I saying?”

“You were saying, Aunt Jane, that Snipkins thought some soils were drier than others;” and I added cheerfully, “This is a very dry soil, Aunt Jane—very! The whole square is remarkably dry; every bit of it is dry; and when Snipkins used to come to London long ago, she was always perfectly well here, but then, Aunt Jane, remember she went out walking every day. So come out, Aunt Jane; it is not raining, and it is exactly a quarter to twelve by that clock.”

But Aunt Jane would not take her morning walk. She would now frequently refuse to leave her chair, saying that if she did go out she had nowhere in particular to go; that a widow like her could not pay visits; that Madame Julie Browne had made all her dresses, and that London was such a very big place that, except for the difference of soil, there was no reason why you should walk in one part of it more than in another.

When she would not go out, I was at my wits’ end to amuse her. She felt too much injured at having neither back nor front avenue to let herself be amused. She was tearful, huffy, and infinitely depressed. At such times she sighed, but rarely spoke; or if she did

peak, it would be merely to remark that when she went out at Sherbrook Hall she always knew exactly how far she had walked, and never walked more one day than another without knowing it.

At last an idea struck me! I invented a back and a front avenue for Aunt Jane on the pavement round Montagu Square. I persuaded her to walk on the west side in the morning, and on the east in the afternoon, and never by any chance to do the contrary, as the sun always set in the west and never set in the east; and therefore, by setting behind the houses, the sun was sooner lost to the western than to the eastern side, and the west side was consequently the drier one in the morning, and the damper one in the afternoon. Aunt Jane had much difficulty in grasping these abstruse astronomical reasons; but from the moment she made them her own, her mind was at ease, and before luncheon she walked up and down on the west side, and after luncheon she walked up and down on the east side of Montagu Square. She leant upon my arm, and constantly remarked, "If you only count exactly how many turns we take to-day, Sophy, we can take just the same to-morrow, and then you see we can never walk more one day than another without knowing it."

So my aunt went out each day at a quarter to twelve. If by accident she happened to be dressed at half-past eleven, she waited fifteen minutes in the hall.

To please her, I observed all the old Sherbrook

punctuality — the hours for breakfasting, lunching, and dining; and I even caused frightening-bells and warning-bells to be rung regularly. I really believe the accustomed sounds kept Aunt Jane alive by making her feel there was still a constant rush and hurry and a positive necessity for punctuality in this busy life of hers. Besides, the odd quarters of an hour and half-hours, and even hours, you can lose by systematically getting ready to be ready, do materially help to turn twelve hours into six.

From long habit I managed to bear the constant bell-ringing with equanimity, although I found the nuisance more trying in a small house than in a large one. It was not the bells, but Dr MacShaw, that most tried my patience. I had perceived, to my horror, that with returning strength my aunt's mind hankered after the 'Commentary,' so I had dexterously mislaid the blessed work.

"Poor dear Edward!" wailed my aunt,— "poor dear Edward always wished me to read Dr MacShaw's exposition of the Holy Scriptures. Sophy, it was poor dear Edward, your poor dear uncle, who wished me to read it." Aunt Jane would then be affected to tears; and if I suggested any other less lengthy Commentary, I invariably found I was heartlessly arguing with "poor dear Edward"! At last my aunt became so nervously excited and irritated by the loss of her sound divine, that I had to find him again, and listen to him also.

Aunt Jane could not read aloud easily, as her utter-

ance was thicker than it used to be, and still she would read Dr MacShaw herself. She would not let me read him to the servants, though I actually offered to do so. Poor Aunt Jane! it was painful to hear her, and yet it was a little touching too: the striving to be what you have been, the determination not to hear your own changed voice nor to perceive your failing faculties, is a tragic sort of play to see, and must ever move one!

Dr MacShaw raised my aunt's spirits. It was strange her orthodoxy should have survived all her shocks, and troubles, and bewilderment! for Aunt Jane still felt herself to be the most orthodox woman in Christendom, though she could not have given a reason for the feeling. In her muddle of mind, her orthodoxy was neither more nor less than an instinct. Indeed I rather think it was by the sound alone that she judged doctrine to be right or wrong. Texts had to be vaguely amplified with a great deal of the peculiar language, or she was sure to perceive the thin end of the wedge. I had much difficulty in discovering a clergyman whose preaching sounded safe to her ear. The fact is, the old peculiar language had wellnigh ceased to be heard in the West End of London. I found that here and there a new sort of peculiar language was being gabbled and mumbled, and partly intoned—a paternally authoritative language, all about saints' days and the Church, especially about the Church.

Two distinct species of clergy speak the new

tongue. The one is bearded and slightly irreverent in manner—very very *high* in the pulpit, and quite *low* out of it; clergymen much given to society, who seem all things to all men. The “great lengths they go,” as the saying is, astonish intimate friends—for their extreme Ritualism, like their teeth, is hidden by their moustache.

The other sort of Ritualist is a very different kind of man. There was one of this second species officiating not far from Montagu Square. He spoke the new tongue. He generally spoke it shortly, and this was a great advantage; but he did not speak eloquently. He was a poor, lean, clean-shaven, ascetic, wooden priest, as deficient in mental as in bodily strength. He was sanctimonious, very sanctimonious in appearance. I really think he tried to ape the oddly contorted and party-coloured saints on the stained-glass windows of his church.

His forehead and his chin flew backwards from his open mouth, as if weakly astonished at the doctrine they heard preached; and I do not wonder!—for it certainly was rather surprising to hear such a pitifully weak, narrow-brained man laud a something which sounded very much like his own infallibility sanctified and turned into a dogma of faith. The humble unquestioning obedience he claimed for the Church in theory he explained, in his own peculiar language, to mean in practice the unreasoning acceptance of his own priestly interfering, minutely interfering despotism. I perceived that nothing which was not infinitely

minute pleased his mind. He liked the infinitely minute in matters of clothing and ritual. His cassock, his alb, his cope, the exact position of himself, his hands, and even of his eyes when he prayed, were, I verily believe, three parts of his religion. When he walked about the streets, the cut of his coat and the shape of his becoming low-crowned hat were most remarkable. I think he liked wearing becoming clothes, because the weaker man, like the weaker woman, has a failing for millinery.

I used to be quite glad when Aunt Jane caught sight of the peculiar hat and the long-flapped coat flitting through Montagu Square. I was glad because she was immensely shocked at thus beholding the too visible mark of the Beast! and it is very good for old ladies like my aunt to be occasionally shocked—it gives them something to say, and raises their circulation. One sight of the Reverend Mr Smith enabled Aunt Jane to talk almost without help for the rest of the day.

The name of the medieval priest was merely Smith—not even de Smythe. This always seemed odd to me, as he looked to date from the earliest ages! In reality, he was a man of no family whatever—quite the contrary! The only profession in England which now gives immediate social position to a young man with no connections, is that of the ritualistic priesthood. Therefore ritualism, with its other temptations, offers this great social one to weak men like Mr Smith.

The Reverend Mr Smith did not stay long in our neighbourhood. He was soon removed to a church not two hundred yards from Belgrave Square. The last time I heard of him, he was said to be engaged to a lady of rank, rather older than himself. I cannot say whether this report be true or not ; but I do know as a fact that he is a great favourite with the ladies. He encourages confession ; and this they all like, especially the more worldly dashing ones. His "early celebrations," matins, nones, complins, and numerous saints'-day services, are overcrowded by ladies of fashion. The higher their heels and the tighter their forty-guinea skirts, the more certainly do they become members of Saint-Electra-the-Blessed's congregation. There would seem to be a natural tendency towards ritualism amongst the fast and ultra-fashionable ; and as to ~~reddened~~ lips and blackened eyebrows, why I have heard it said that if only young enough, they are invariably High Church. False fronts and the more elderly types of female disfigurement are still, like Lady Arabella, not unfrequently *low*,—for Low Church was the fashion in Lady Arabella's youth.

Fashion does more for religion nowadays than martyrdom in the days of old ; and to my mind it is sad—it is horrible this should be so.

While I was searching for a clergyman whom Aunt Jane could "sit under" and feel safe, I took her to Mr Smith's church. The shock she there received quite galvanised her paralysis, and was of more use to her than the doctor's tonic prescription ; but it had one

yellow hair
and

very awkward result for me. Aunt Jane got an attack of ritualistic-popery on the brain. She saw the popish plot everywhere—even in the services of clergymen who held most moderate views. My aunt became *lower* than she had ever been before. I saw that in her present state no one but a regular old-fashioned Thunderbore would sound safe to her ear.

At last, to my great relief, I discovered a divine whose “views” I thought would suit hers. I took her to the proprietary chapel where he preached, and I rejoice to say my aunt was delighted with Dr Flanagan, and “sat under” him with a feeling of perfect safety, because for two successive Sundays he preached on the types and antetypes of Solomon’s Temple. He divided each sermon into four heads, not counting the final “and now to conclude,” which was a lengthy discourse in itself.

The four heads of the first sermon were, to use Dr Flanagan’s own words—1, dimensions; 2, the platform raised; 3, stones fitted and polished; 4, overlaid with silver.

And the four heads of the second—1, covered with cedar; 2, carved; 3, enshrined in gold; 4, adorned with precious stones.

Under each of these heads were classed the types and antetypes of every faith, heresy, virtue, backsliding, and theological and historical event I had almost ever heard of.

My aunt felt spiritually refreshed by the types and antetypes of Solomon’s Temple. The doctrine sounded

so perfectly orthodox to her ear, because she had heard much the same sort of thing before: if new, it would not have sounded safe.

Aunt Jane said Dr Flanagan's preaching reminded her of dear Mr Thunderbore's favourite sermon on the golden vessels of the tabernacle; and so it did me! for I had not forgotten, and never shall forget, the exhaustive and exhausting discourse preached by the Vicar of Klipton upon the text, "The tongs thereof and the snuff dishes thereof shall be of pure gold."

Highly as Aunt Jane rated the Reverend Dr Flanagan's doctrine in the pulpit, still more highly did she rate his soundness and his learning when she came to read and to digest the books he had published specially for members of his own congregation. There was one small work of biblical research which became a great favourite with Aunt Jane. I copy word for word some of the important and interesting facts it contained:—

The middle chapter and the least in the Bible is Psalm cxvii.

The middle verse is the 8th verse of Psalm cxviii.

The middle time is 2 Chronicles, chapter iv., 16th verse.

The word AND occurs in the Old Testament 35,543 times.

The word AND occurs in the New Testament 10,684 times.

There are 66 books in the Holy Bible, 1189 chapters, 31,173 verses, 773,602 words, 3,566,480 letters.

The middle book of the Old Testament is Proverbs. The middle chapter is Job xxix. The middle verse is in 2 Chronicles, chapter xx., *between* the 17th and 18th verses.

The least verse is 1 Chronicles, chapter i., 1st verse.

The 21st verse of the 7th chapter of Ezra has all the letters of the alphabet.

The middle book of the New Testament is Thessalonians ii.

The middle chapter is *between* Romans xiii. and xiv.

The middle verse is Acts xvii., 17th verse.

The least verse is John xi., 35th verse.

Amongst all this erudite information, the one piece of profound research which most impressed Aunt Jane's imagination was—the word AND occurs in the Old Testament 35,543 times; the word AND occurs in the New Testament 10,684 times.

My aunt herself tried to count the *ands* in the Old Testament, and I declare I thought she would send me clean out of my senses; for every two minutes she would ask, "Sophy, Sophy, did I last say 152, or 153, or 154?—for now I almost think I really said 151."

"I am sure I don't know, Aunt Jane!"

"You never do know anything, Sophy!—you never know anything! So I think it is very lucky I put a pencil-mark at the hundredth *and*, for now at least I can always go back to that one."

As she never rightly counted to a thousand, the long patience (which is genius) of the divine who

could count 35,543 *ands* in the Old Testament and 10,684 in the New, overpowered her with admiring veneration.

“Poor dear Edward!” she would exclaim; “poor dear Edward! How diligently he would have studied Dr Flanagan’s interesting little work! Poor dear Edward! I wish he could have read it before he died, Sophy. Poor dear Edward!—and I do wonder, Sophy, if Catherine has ever read it? And I really do not think she has; and I must say I do think she really would appreciate it, for Catherine is not like you, Sophy! because she always did enjoy everything that was improving—and indeed Catherine never read any but good books, Sophy, never! And I do wonder now if Catherine would like me to send her a copy of Dr Flanagan’s valuable work; because, perhaps, Sophy, poor Gordon-Sherbrook might like Catherine to read it out to him; for, as he is not dead, I think he may be getting better.”

Aunt Jane’s fear of Mrs Stewart was gradually creating the desire to propitiate her—fear, especially undefined fear, so often produces this tendency in weak characters.

I should have had great trouble in preventing Aunt Jane from sending Dr Flanagan out to Malta, and from thus entangling herself in a correspondence with Catherine Stewart, had we not just then received the news of Gordon-Sherbrook’s death. It was David wrote it to me, and he had heard it in Scotland from some of the numerous Stewart connection.

"At last, Sophy," wrote he, "that unhappy man has been tatted to death. I need hardly say your admirable Catherine did arrive in time to make his will. Her brother-in-law—Stewart of Starvey—tells me she is left Sherbrook Hall and everything by a will signed just two days before the poor young fellow's death. Stewart knows his sister-in-law so well, that he did not seem a bit surprised."

Can it be believed? Aunt Jane's mind was in such a strange maze that she said to me, "I dare say, Sophy, that Catherine will not care to live at Sherbrook Hall, so I should not be surprised if she asked me to go and live there, and gave the house and place back to me again,—for it was Gordon-Sherbrook who was so very particular about everything." Unless I had heard my aunt say these words with her own lips, no power on earth could have made me believe she would have said them. It was an incomprehensible miracle that memory should return and yet be wholly a wrong impression. Catherine's hard, self-seeking covetousness was the one idea you would expect Aunt Jane's memory to bring back to her if it returned at all.

Although I contradicted Aunt Jane's new notion till I feared seriously to excite her and make her ill, I could not root out the new impression I saw growing upon her, that she would soon return to Sherbrook, and live there, perhaps even with Catherine, again—"for Catherine is not really angry with me, Sophy."

There is a certain sort of hazily forgetting, and

therefore forgiving charity, believing no ill of any person who has once seized a real, firm, tyrannical grip of your mind, which is very puzzling to consider thoughtfully, for it is not the real Christian charity at all.

By aid of the new impression, Mrs Stewart regained her former hold upon my aunt's mind and affections: so much so, that another letter I received from David sent Aunt Jane into hysterics and loud despair. David wrote to me saying: "The admirable Catherine having at last grasped all your uncle's fortune and estate, has been seized with a dangerous attack of typhoid fever. The fever has caught her in the midst of her successful plots and plans just as she was leaving Malta, and I declare, Sophy, it looks uncommonly as if she had been struck down by the very Providence whose name she so blasphemously takes in vain. I expect she is really going to die."

To this I instantly replied: "My dearest David,— You are mistaken! Disagreeable people have remarkably good constitutions! A fever that would kill you won't kill Mrs Stewart. All cats have nine lives, and the hungry ones have ten! Come, David, I will lay you a wager, a £5-note, that the admirable tatter will live, and for many a long year will cheerfully rejoice over her poor son's 'happy release.' Believe me, the woman is too disagreeable to die!"

P but David *P* not pay it because *P* he wanted to improve *P* at the time. *P* David took the bet, and I gained it; *P* Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart made a rapid recovery. I was informed that she astonished the worthy naval surgeon, who attended her for nothing.

Aunt Jane rejoiced every hour in the day over poor dear Catherine's blessed deliverance from a fearful malady. The typhoid attack had turned Catherine into a "poor dear"!

Poor dear Catherine's illness kept Aunt Jane in an everlasting round of wonder. "Sophy, now that poor dear Catherine is getting better, I wonder if she takes beef-tea? I wonder if she is very pale? She always was rather pinched and yellow! I wonder what she looks like, Sophy?"

"She looks, Aunt Jane, like a sick rook in a graveyard, pecking at her son's will as if it were a horrid worm."

"What do you mean? What do you mean, Sophy?" gasped my aunt.

"I mean, Aunt Jane, that the first thought Catherine Stewart will bring back with her from death and from the grave will be that will. She will grasp it in her yellow claws, and gloat over it with craving hunger."

But Aunt Jane could not see this picture of the greedy Catherine. She could not follow my eyes and see what I saw. She only added to eternal wonderings about poor dear Catherine, endless wonderings as to what Sophy meant, and as to why Sophy never would speak exactly like other people, but always said queer things.

Mrs Sherbrook Stewart's perfect restoration to bodily and mental health was announced to us in rather a peculiar way. She sent Aunt Jane an attorney's letter, requesting the immediate payment of an enclosed ac-

count. This was a bill for £180. The items were servants' wages and other expenses of housekeeping incurred during the month my aunt had remained at Sherbrook Hall after my uncle's death.

I instantly paid the £180. My pride revolted from the idea of Aunt Jane's being forced to haggle about housekeeping expenses with a woman like Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart.

From the day Aunt Jane received Mrs Stewart's bill, I noticed with pleasure that she ceased to call the best of women "poor dear Catherine." Had I only had a little more money to spare, I should have thought the £180 well spent; for I saw Aunt Jane could understand the meanness of the housekeeper's bill. I saw it almost opened her eyes to one side of Mrs Stewart's character. Little unladylike housekeeping meannesses made Aunt Jane very indignant, and were perfectly within the grasp of her comprehension. Intrigues about wills, deeply undermining and lasting many years, were beyond her power of imagination.

CHAPTER IX.

As I could not go to David yet, I found that by thinking of him always, I brought him to me, and I again fell into my old habit of walking with my imagination beside me. I thus not unfrequently had almost an agreeable walk on the pavement round Montagu Square, because my thoughts were not there at all. If poor Aunt Jane were particularly irritable, and the weather a depressing smoky fog, they wandered in spring time by the path over the hill at Sherbrook Hall, and there David and I would meet as we first met on that day which seemed to me like yesterday. If I live to be an old woman, that day will still be yesterday; and when I am deaf, I still shall hear its pleasant warbling sounds; and when my eyes are growing dim, I know that even then I shall see David coming up to meet me from the valley like the spirit of one of those far-off voices my ear remembers still.

As of old, I loved most to dwell upon the memory of that day. Hours of unconscious, unawakened happiness, like pleasant dreams, or like the joys of child-

hood, leave an impression of quiet rapture on the mind which the remembrance of impassioned, throbbing, conscious joy, or of sorrow thrilled suddenly into delirious delight, can never leave. The agitation of intense excitement is painful, and there is a joy, the pang of which can almost kill. It is no pleasure to think upon it and feel its pain again.

That my imagination should have preferred the old familiar scene to the new ones it could so easily have painted before my eyes, will doubtless seem odd; but the truth is, I did not care to be always seeing David, as he now was, in Louisa Clarke's presence. I naturally liked better to see him in my own.

Those Clarkes had got hold of David. They had taken a place in Scotland, and eight of David's last letters had been written from their house. The moment Mrs Stewart got better, he could write about nothing but the private theatricals he and the Clarke girls and Mrs Clownton were rehearsing, apparently morning, noon, and night.

I had often heard of this Mrs Clownton before from Lady Arabella. Her father's mother was a near relation of Lady Arabella's stepmother's first husband. Indeed, every one has heard of the Honble. Mrs Augustus Clownton, so I need not say much about her. If she goes to stay in a country house for a week, she gets up private theatricals, and stays three, perhaps six weeks. She is quite mad about acting, and has made it her regular profession in society. She gives up her life to this mania. It is generally

believed that she went on the stage to perfect her elocution, and appeared publicly in the provinces. She is considered decidedly fast, but Lady Arabella had told me fashionable mothers do not object to her, because she has the reputation of giving the right parts to the right people, and of making up desirable matches by a judicious system of rehearsal. As a rule, she is perfectly successful in her little arrangements, though I do remember Lady Arabella telling me she had once signally failed. On that occasion the right people had rehearsed together, and the wrong people had run away. However, it seems nobody then blamed Mrs Clownton. It was acknowledged she had done what she could, and could not do more. Women of the world did not drop her. "She goes everywhere!" Lady Arabella had said; "my dear Sophy, she goes everywhere! Mrs Clownton is full of tact and cleverness, and does not make up matches on the stage, but off it. She is strictly proper, too, and invariably gives the lover's part to a married man. Mrs Clownton could never be guilty of making a good *parti* propose in the glare of the footlights, so the young men are not afraid of her. All her combinations are behind the scenes."

I remembered these words the more distinctly, because Lady Arabella had hallowed them at the time by the sanctifying whisper of scandal. Not having in the least forgotten them, I was glad, when David first mentioned this Mrs Augustus Clownton, to think he himself was married, and Louisa Clarke engaged to

Mr Fred Tankney. And then I could not understand why I should be glad. David had long ceased to like Louisa before he had proposed to me. I knew he had, so I was not at all jealous of her. No; I knew I was not. Of this I felt perfectly certain. Though, on second thoughts, I did perhaps think I might have felt a very little bit jealous of her . . . well, that is a strong term . . . a little bit uncomfortable about her, if the Louisa of nowadays had been the soft, melting Louisa I had known in my girlhood. But I quickly conjured up before my eyes the slangy fast young lady just fresh from Manyfields, whom I had met at Mineham. And now my imagination could see her acting as the heroine of a piece called "Our Young Swells." I laughed aloud at the sight, and startled Aunt Jane, who thought "Sophy" queerer than ever.

Apropos of these "Young Swells," David had written to me: "As I am the only married man here under fourteen stone odd, Mrs Clownton will insist upon my acting lover to Miss Louisa." So I wrote back and asked him if acting lover to Louisa meant lighting her cigar? Whereupon David and I exchanged a good deal of lively jesting upon this and all other subjects. David was a very lively and agreeable letter-writer, and did not write, like most Englishmen, circumspectly for judge and jury. His letters to me and mine to him were now the one pleasure of my life. David is the only person I know to whom I care to write, because when I write to him I can be as imprudent as I like, and say exactly what comes into my head. A

perfectly natural letter shocks most people, and it is this which makes ordinary letter-writing the hateful burden it is.

David's lively descriptions of the amateur actors staying in the Clarkes' house, and of their sayings and doings, and huffs, and rehearsal flirtations, greatly amused me. David dashed off these portraits in the highest spirits and most natural language. The only part of his agreeable letters I did not altogether enjoy was the constantly recurring postscript: "I am fearfully hard up, Sophy. Send me another £10-note." I began to realise that David was a man who always spent a great deal more money than he expected. If he thought a certain sum would last a fortnight, it lasted exactly one week.

During our honeymoon I had perceived he was a very generous creature, without the slightest capacity for arithmetic. When Uncle Sherbrook died, he had told me to take a house and furnish it for Aunt Jane, and to give my aunt any allowance I liked—£200, £300, £400, £500, even £600 a-year!—it was all the same to him! What could be kinder in its way than this? David literally fulfilled the Gospel precept, and his right hand never knew what his left hand gave; so what he gave with his left hand he expected to find in his right. I was beginning to fear he forgot his own charities, for he seemed to think he had my £2000 a-year, as well as his own little allowance from Lady Arabella, in hand and to spend.

When I sent him clear calculations to prove the

contrary, I only discovered he heartily detested arithmetic. He told me so in the most natural style imaginable, and was quite witty on the subject. I did not know how to scold him.

Once only did I find fault with David, and reproach him a little for what he had written. It was when he wrote: "I am delighted, my dear Sophy, you are not here. You would be dreadfully in the way, for Mrs Clownton is determined to make every person who does not act feel *de trop* in this house. As your uncle is not dead six months, it would be impossible, they all tell me, for you to take part in private theatricals. You ladies cannot throw off your mourning and put it on again like us men. No one seems a bit scandalised at my acting; indeed Mrs Clownton and Miss Louisa declare they could not get on without me. They both say, if you came here hung all over with black crape, you might prevent me from dashing about as one of *our young swells*, in a sky-blue satin dressing-gown, so Louisa Clarke repeats fifty times a-day it is the luckiest thing possible you did not come north with me, and I begin to think that, under the circumstances, perhaps it is. Not, my dear Sophy, that I could think so under any other."

This last sentence pleased me, yet could not take away the effect of the one before it. The tone of the whole letter hurt me. I told David so. Whereupon he wrote to me in such a repentant, affectionate manner, that I forgave him, and even felt ashamed at having chided him.

I looked forward with great joy to our near meeting, for at last I thought I could name the very day when David would come home to me. Aunt Jane's house was to be ready for her in a fortnight's time.

I did not at all like telling her so ! For many days I put off until the morrow the disagreeable task of telling Aunt Jane about her house, and hinting to her about moving into it. When at last I managed to gather courage and broach the delicate subject, the result was very unsatisfactory.

"Aunt Jane," I said, nervously, "it is fortunate your house is just ready, or when David comes home, I should not know where to put him."

"As David is well amused, he had much better stay where he is !" replied my aunt with surprising point and energy. "David will be very much bored if he comes here and has to lead the quiet sort of life we lead, because he is not like poor dear Edward ! Poor, poor dear Edward ! David is not a bit like him ! not a bit, Sophy !"

Aunt Jane took no pains to conceal that, in her opinion, David was anything but an improving companion for me ; so not being an improving husband, like poor dear Edward, she never seemed to think he was my husband at all. She appeared incapable of grasping the fact that I was as much married to David as she had been to Uncle Sherbrook.

I stole round again to the matter I had most at heart. "Aunt Jane," I said, "when you are once settled in your new house, it is so near this one, that

you will feel exactly as if you were living under the same roof with me."

"No, Sophy!" she exclaimed,—“no; I shall not feel as if I were doing anything of the sort! because, instead of telling you several times during the morning to put on your things before twelve o'clock, I shall have to send some one in from my house to remind you to get ready. I know I shall! and I know you will be talking to David, or else he will be talking to you, for Catherine used to say he was always talking, and always talking about himself, and I am sure he is not at all what I call a sensible man, Sophy, and he has no idea of method or punctuality, and I know you have very little either."

I turned a patient ear to these and to other little irrelevant extras, and, in spite of every discouragement, I brought my aunt back to the point. I well knew what my own point was. I said quietly: "Yes, Aunt Jane, David is very unpunctual and very provoking, so I am sure you would not like to live with him. I think, my dear, you will be glad to find yourself once more in a house of your own."

To this my aunt only replied: "I don't like a damp house, and I never will like a damp house, Sophy!"

I suggested that a house never could be really dry unless there was some one living in it.

"I shall not argue, Sophy!" said my aunt huffily,—"I shall not argue any more."

I ransacked my brain, and still persevered, but nothing I could say seemed to throw a glamour over

the incurably damp soil of a house not five yards from the dry ground beneath our own feet.

It was then I found I had made a foolish mistake. I saw I should have removed my aunt straight from Sherbrook Hall into a house of her own, for now that I had let her have her punctual bells tinkling every hour, and the Commentary besides, she had taken root in mine.* My house had become a habit to her, and all the more easily, because she had been accustomed to stay there of old. A fresh house, where she had never been before, would be a new habit to her, and therefore a disturbing, hateful distraction of mind.

I was in despair!

To make matters worse, David kept writing to me: "Sophy, I will not settle a day for my return, until I hear your aunt is actually living in her own house."

It was under these apparently hopeless circumstances that an invitation came from Lady Arabella to Aunt Jane, pressing my aunt to pay her a nice long visit at Mineham, and saying Lady Arabella had some very interesting little bits of news to her. It was a really kind letter. The invitation enchanted me! I fervently hoped Aunt Jane would accept it, especially as by the very same post I got a hasty line from David, written as if he knew beforehand of Lady Arabella's intended invitation. It was a hurried scrawl put in an envelope, with the stamp upside down. "Expect me next Saturday," he wrote; "we are to have a dress rehearsal on Thursday, and our final grand display on Friday. That Mrs Clownton is a hateful woman! If

you do not make your Aunt Jane accept Aunt Arabella's invitation, I shall never forgive you."

I was nervously afraid Aunt Jane would refuse to go, so I was agreeably surprised to hear her wonder what news dear Lady Arabella could have to tell her! and then remark that really Mineham was a very dry house, very! nearly as dry as Sherbrook Hall; "but . . . but . . . but you know, Sophy, I am in too deep mourning to go anywhere, and Lady Arabella is not a relation."

I pointed out that Lady Arabella was now a very near connection, being my aunt by marriage. This was a powerful argument in favour of Mineham, for Aunt Jane held the strongest family clique views on the subject of mourning. Aunt Jane seemed pleased to think that Lady Arabella, being my aunt by marriage, might certainly be considered a connection of her own.

So Aunt Jane said she would go to Mineham. Then she said she would not go. She changed her mind several times, and kept me in a nervous fever. She prayed over the invitation. Finally she declared poor dear Edward would have liked her to accept it: "Yes, Sophy, I know poor dear Edward would! I know he would! And I wonder, Sophy, what sort of news it is Lady Arabella is going to tell me."

At the last moment, I thought Aunt Jane would never start. I was to take her down to Mineham, and settle her there. Having for many years been accustomed, when travelling, to the protection of poor dear

Edward, my aunt seemed to expect every sort of dreadful accident would happen to her, "now that I have only you, Sophy." I think she was much surprised when at length she arrived at Mineham perfectly uninjured.

Lady Arabella dared not rush out in the cold to meet us on the doorstep, for fear of inflaming her delicate throat, but she waved a welcome to us through the hall window instead, and looked quite rapturously delighted to see us, and appeared to be talking volubly at the other side of the glass. She was talking as we entered the door, and literally overflowed upon us in the hall. Before we could reach the drawing-room, I knew that Lord Studhorse was at last engaged to Miss Elmer-Elmer, that Denis spent half his time at Manyfields, that Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone was dying of jealousy, that Lady Offaway's conduct was shocking in the extreme, that young Mr Tankney was behaving scandalously, and that Lady Arabella had not had a soul to talk to for a century. Lady Arabella never considered Mrs Thunderbore anybody. Lady Arabella having first said "a century," corrected herself, and said it was exactly a fortnight since Catherine Sherbrook-Stewart had spent two days with her. "David heard Catherine was here, from the Clarkes, who heard it from Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone, who by-the-by, Sophy, won't speak to Catherine now! and David wrote me the most severe scolding I ever got in my life. He said, if I could not live alone, I might very well ask your Aunt Jane to come and stay

with me, but that he would never speak to me again if I had Catherine any more." Lady Arabella lowered her voice, and half closing the door, kept me standing outside it.

Aunt Jane had already entered the room wondering aloud, wondering hopelessly. Her mind could not grasp such rapid novelty,—it could not rush from one fresh bit of news to another,—so she was still wondering about Lord Studhorsey and Miss Elmer-Elmer, and she wondered what duet it was she had heard Lord Studhorsey sing with Ermyutrude Elmer-Elmer.

We could hear Aunt Jane wondering on in this style, all by herself, in the drawing-room. Lady Arabella spoke in a whisper. "David has told me a great many facts about Catherine, Sophy," said she, "which I did not know before, and I never was more surprised, never! for, Sophy, you cannot imagine how nicely Catherine spoke about the inscrutable ways of Providence, and the miraculous manner in which she herself had been endowed with a wholly unexpected fortune."

"I can imagine it, Aunt Arabella," I replied.

Lady Arabella again lowered her voice, as in speaking it had risen above the depths of perfect mystery. "Catherine is a most extraordinary person—most extraordinary!" she whispered; "I could hardly believe David at first when he wrote and told me how Catherine has behaved about your uncle's will, and how she has managed to cut that poor James Sherbrook and his nine children out of the property. But what is that, Sophy?" and Lady Arabella forgot to whisper,—“ what

is that to the enormity of persuading your uncle to change the will, in which you were left £30,000 at your aunt's death? I might have forgiven Catherine," she naïvely confessed, "for ruining James Sherbrook, but I never will forgive her for having cut David out of his just expectations. It is a great disappointment to me, Sophy, and a terrible one to David! terrible! He was quite sure of the £30,000, for your uncle told him you would have it when he proposed for you, and I had heard it from Catherine herself months before. I now see Catherine has cheated us all! Poor David!"

A sudden fear seized me. "David is not disappointed!" I exclaimed indignantly; "David did not marry me for money!"

My voice re-echoed in the empty hall, and came back to me, to surprise me with my own anger. I had startled Lady Arabella. She stared at me through her glasses, and flinging open the door, she trotted into the drawing-room to Aunt Jane, who was still wondering over the Elmer-Elmer and Studhorsey match. Matrimonial engagements always interest Aunt Jane, even when she does not know the people engaged: when she does know them, the interest is intense. Fortunately Lady Arabella had a great deal to say, and could not help saying it, about Lord Studhorsey's £20,000 a-year, about the jealousy of sundry musical mothers, and the delight of that Mrs Elmer, who was reported to have said: "My dear Miss Horston, I felt all along I was perfectly right in not allowing Mr Reginald Meltem to sing *t'Amo* with my Ermyntrode."

This Miss Horston is one of Lady Arabella's twenty-five constant correspondents, and the greatest gossip of them all. Except the annual concert for the Blacks, and occasional bazaaring, and much talking, Lady Arabella's only real occupation in life lies in writing and receiving letters. By means of her correspondence, she is not unfrequently loaded with the gossip of sixteen country houses, besides all the ordinary small talk and scandal of London. At such times she is a gun which must be fired off or burst.

The Elmer-Elmer and Studhorsey engagement continued until dinner-time. The subject was renewed at the dinner-table, and there became entangled in a bit of intermarriage connected with Lord Studhorsey's grandmother's sister's husband, who was Lady Arabella's grandfather's first cousin. So intricate was the complication, that we hurried dinner, and rose before dessert, in order to hasten into the drawing-room and consult Debrett.

Much as I dislike the complications of intermarriage, I was glad to see my two aunts occupied with any one's marriage, save David's and mine. I nervously dreaded another hint of the idea which Lady Arabella had betrayed to me. I longed to forget it; or if I could not forget it, I wished to think of it alone, and disprove the cruel suspicion to myself, when no one should be there to guess my thoughts, or curiously to observe them redden in my face.

When at length the Studhorsey relationship was exhausted, I rejoiced to find the great Elmer-Elmer

“catch” led, by the natural transitions of musical jealousy, straight to Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone, and nowhere near David. Lady Arabella said Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone was infinitely disgusted that “a mere singer of solfeggi”—for that is what she always will call Miss Ermyntrude—“should have caught” a rich peer. From Jumping Georgy, Lady Arabella passed to Rigardy-Wrenstone, and on mentioning his name, fell instantly into the whisper of scandal. I overheard “constantly at Manyfields.” A groan from Aunt Jane drowned the rest; then I heard, “Don’t be alarmed, my dear Mrs Sherbrook, don’t be alarmed! He merely goes there for the fashion of the thing! Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone has no real cause for jealousy. It is that son of Lord Tankney’s . . .” Lady Arabella dropped her voice still lower, and Aunt Jane’s groans increasing, I only heard such bits of sentences as “Lady Offaway . . . shocking in the extreme . . . Mr Tankney . . . perfectly scandalous . . . she wanted to take him to Scotland . . . Lord Offaway refused . . . Lady Offaway would not go without him . . . stayed at Manyfields . . . Mr Tankney rides over . . . meet every day . . . everybody knows it . . . Lady Offaway . . . quite spoilt the neighbourhood . . . appropriates all the young men . . . inexpressibly shocking . . . fine tenor voice . . . having been introduced by me into society, Mr Tankney might have gone anywhere.” Under these circumstances, it was certainly deplorable he should go to Manyfields and never come to Mineham.

Amidst her own groans and moans over the wickedness of a world much changed since her youth, Aunt Jane managed to exclaim, "But, Lady Arabella, Mr Tankney is engaged, and he is engaged to that pretty girl Louisa Clarke, and she really is very pretty, and, poor girl, how very dreadful for her!"

"She deserves it! she deserves it, Mrs Sherbrook!" cried Lady Arabella, in loud indignation: "a lady who can jilt a gentleman, no matter how desirable it may have been for him, thoroughly deserves to be jilted herself! *Du reste*, my dear Mrs Sherbrook, that young lady is the most accomplished of flirts! She is a very dangerous girl, and she will flirt with any one, for it is her nature to flirt; she . . ." Lady Arabella paused, and deliberately putting on her glasses, she turned and looked at me. "Miss Louisa will flirt with a married man; I have heard strange tales of her from Julia Horston, and, Sophy, I could tell you the most extraordinary stories . . ." The voice dropped.

"Not now, Aunt Arabella! not now," I cried, hastily; "let us have prayers instead. It is half-past ten, and I know you like to have prayers for the servants whenever you can."

Lady Arabella looked annoyed, but could not say no. When last I had stayed at Mineham, she had regretted each evening not being able to have prayers for the servants. Lady Arabella always spoke as if prayers were very necessary for the servants, but not perhaps quite so necessary for herself.

So we had prayers for the servants. Then I slipped

off to bed. But Aunt Jane, who at home invariably went to bed with the Commentary fresh upon the top of her mind,—Aunt Jane, marvellous to relate! continued to sit up with her talkative hostess. The prayers proved to be merely a short interlude in the midst of Lady Arabella's overflowing gossip.

Aunt Jane would do at Mineham what she would not do anywhere else,—she felt so perfectly “safe” there. Lady Arabella's “soundness” was a dogma she received. Aunt Jane never felt obliged to set a good example at Mineham: it was different in her own house, or in Sophy's! very different in Sophy's!

Aunt Jane did not come up-stairs until after midnight. This is a fact. I heard her pass my door, and I looked at my watch. I noted the strange phenomenon as curiously as an astronomer might the passage of Venus. I was wide awake, for I had not gone to bed to sleep, but to think;—to think of David from the hour I first met him; to scan his conduct closely; to recall his every word. I could remember his words as I remembered no other man's or woman's. An odious suspicion had entered my heart. Gossiping busybodies who try to fill us with jealous fancies, as if suspicion were a pleasant pastime for our mind, seem unaware it is a grievous pain to doubt, however little, those we love. I hated to doubt David's disinterested affection. I told myself over and over again, I could not doubt it; and yet what Lady Arabella had said about David's disappointment and the £30,000, lingered like a stinging adder in my heart.

When, amidst the clutching greed which held disgusting revel in Uncle Sherbrook's house, I had mourned the poor man's death and his forgotten grave, I had felt really and truly glad that he had left me no money in his will,—nothing for me to grasp, now he was gone! nothing wherewith to pay me for my affection, as if it had been merchandise given him on speculation for hard cash. It had never entered my head to imagine David might have other feelings from mine. The cruel suspicion could never have been born of my own imagination. It was thrust into my mind against my will, and I tried to kill it quickly. I searched the past, feeling sure I should find no food for it to live upon; but where I thought to starve, I fed. I found to my cost that suspicion can live and grow upon mere brooding. Then, it is true, what could not grow by day will grow apace by night. By night, the dimmest haze will take a shape and become a certainty, tormenting us by its irritating clearness.

Suspicion grew upon me in the dark, till it became a conviction, and, like a horrid nightmare, I felt powerless in its grasp. It was many a long hour before I fell asleep.

Sleep is an angel which stands between the terror of the night and the calm awakening of the morning. It stands with outspread wings shading the nightmare from our sight. I awoke to believe again in David's disinterested love, and with refreshed strength I steadfastly thrust aside the mean and painful doubt;

yet I put it away from me knowingly. I could not quite forget the dream. There was a thought I kept from me at arm's length—a thought I determined not to ponder over any more.

I was glad to think I had only this one day to spend at Mineham,—very glad to know I should go home on the morrow, and find David awaiting me. I tried to think of our happy meeting.

The whole livelong day I was occupied in manœuvring to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with Lady Arabella, for I saw she was set upon getting me quite to herself. She kept perpetually inventing little excuses—"By-the-by, Sophy, you would like to see the conservatory;" or else, "By-the-by, you would like to see the new leak in the cupola of the Chinese music-room." To my relief, Aunt Jane invariably exclaimed, "If Sophy goes, then I will go too." Luckily Aunt Jane stuck to one like glue, and was of all people the most difficult to get rid of, especially on a wet day. I was delighted to see the rain, as had it been fine, Lady Arabella might have carried me off in the chariot to cross-question me about David.

Perhaps it may seem odd that a lady, who prides herself upon her tact as if it were one of her personal attractions, should spend the greater part of a day in laying traps for a gossip upon the one subject which, of all others, tact should avoid. But this can only appear strange to those who have not studied the peculiar constitution of an elderly lady shut up in a solitary country house with a ton weight of gossiping

letters, and without a soul to talk to for a whole century ! Lady Arabella was getting a little too old for visiting about from house to house in winter time, as she used to do in former days.

I could see plainly enough that Lady Arabella's numerous correspondents had written her a great deal of gossip about David's conduct, feelings, and affairs.

I artfully entangled David's inquisitive aunt in the complications of intermarriage. Aunt Jane helped me to make many valuable transitions. Thanks to her, we had Lord Studhorsey's grandmother's sister's husband, who was Lady Arabella's grandfather's cousin, over again. Lady Arabella, having once become entangled in intermarriage, could not disentangle herself.

I miraculously contrived to end the day without a *tête-à-tête*. Next morning I was delighted to see yesterday's rain had not poured itself out in the night, as I well knew Lady Arabella's complexion could not venture abroad in the damp, and I had feared I might have to drive alone with her in the chariot to the station.

My train did not start till past twelve, but I managed to be much occupied with my packing all the morning. Lady Arabella sent her maid several times to tell me she could see me in her bedroom. I invented an excuse each time, and by dexterous diplomacy, I finally contrived to put off saying good-bye until the carriage was actually waiting for me at the door. I ran into Lady Arabella's room, exclaiming, "I am off ! I am off !"

Her ladyship was still in her dressing-gown, though

her head, like the gorgeous king of Israel and Judah, was arrayed in all its glory. Lady Arabella rose nimbly and embraced me : having clasped her arms round my neck, she did not unclasp them.

"It is very kind of you," said I, and I thought so with all my heart—"it is very kind of you to have Aunt Jane."

"Not at all ! not at all, my dear !" replied David's good-natured aunt ; "it is always a pleasure to have an old friend. I like having her, and I must have some one to talk to who holds the same views as myself. *Du reste*, Sophy, I know David, and I know he would never go home to you and live in the same house as your Aunt Jane ; and, my dear, I am particularly anxious for David to be . . ."

"Good-bye, Aunt Arabella !" cried I, hastily ; "good-bye !" But her arms were firmly fastened round my neck. She had caught me, and she kept me, and she said her little say.

"David is a man who ought always to be with his own wife, for he is not safe with any one else. He is a born flirt, my dear. . . ." The grasp was tightened, and the voice lowered,— "I give you kindly warning, *ma chère enfant*, so take it, and do not be angry."

I felt Lady Arabella did mean kindly, but I thought hers was the kindness of the dentist who draws the wrong tooth. "I know you mean to be kind," I said ; "but good-bye ! good-bye ! or my train will be gone."

Still there was no escape for me. Lady Arabella was only the more determined to hold me fast. She

whispered eagerly into my ear; she whispered with the eagerness which fears it may never get so good a chance again: "Sophy, Sophy, take the advice of an old woman who has had some experience of life! When David flirts, flirt too, flirt violently, my dear, till you make him jealous. You are sure to succeed in the end!"

For a moment I was speechless from sheer amazement. I angrily, and even roughly, disengaged myself from Lady Arabella's embrace. My voice returned to me, and I exclaimed passionately: "I abhor the vile idea! it is odious to every feeling that I have! No, no, Aunt Arabella, I will never fall so low as that; ~~and~~ I will not stoop to infamy!" I cried out the word *infamy* with all the scorn of bitter detestation.

Never, never did I see any one look more astonished than Lady Arabella. "Good gracious, Sophy!" she exclaimed; "good gracious! Whoever could have thought you were strait laced!" And she added, with a kind of naïve wonder, "Why, there am I; I have always held the strictest views, but they never prevented me from amusing myself in my own way when poor dear Charles amused himself in his! and it was solely by a judicious system of flirtation that I kept Charles straight! and, Sophy, Sophy, David is his uncle's own nephew! so be advised . . ." But I ran away, for I had had quite enough of Lady Arabella's sound advice.

There was more good advice awaiting me in the hall, but of another sort. Aunt Jane gave it me with her blessing. She advised me to keep punctual hours, and

on no account to let David omit the Commentary at either morning or evening prayers; and she ended by wishing David were a more improving husband for me. "Well, Aunt Jane," said I, cheerfully, for I dreaded her tears, "at all events I am enabled to leave *you* with an improving companion."

"Oh, Sophy, Sophy!" she answered, solemnly, "I always do feel spiritually refreshed by dear Lady Arabella's conversation, and I do wish you and David would take pattern by her. But you won't! you won't! I know you won't!" And I left Aunt Jane sighing and groaning on the doorstep.

I had the whole chariot to my own reflections. I thought of Lady Arabella's extraordinary suggestion, and I did not forget she was the distinguished "Light" of a certain singularly pious set; yet, my first surprise over, her advice appeared none the stranger to me for this. I knew Lady Arabella to be a good-natured, kindly woman of the world, brought up amongst women of the world who were patronising Sambo because he was the lion of their day. Accident had linked her to the blacks in her youth, and through the blacks to the extreme Low Church. I knew it was her social position and family connection which alone had made her a "Light."

I wondered had I held sound views if Lady Arabella would have given me the advice she did; and I thought not. Though only a Light by accident, she has all the prejudices of a shining Light; and I have often observed that Lights think a person must be

“lost” who does not happen to profess the exact shade of opinion they imagine to be their own. Aunt Jane—a Light in her way!—considers Sophy to be capable of any crime; and as to Lady Arabella, why I am sure she was convinced nothing could possibly shock a person like Sophy! I can quite believe the idea of Sophy’s being strait-laced had never entered her head.

Sound Lights seem to believe there can be no steady conviction of right and wrong without extreme “views.” As if to steer a vessel it were best to stand on the masthead upon one toe, giving for a reason that you are nearer heaven than on deck.

A great many things which most Lights think sadly wicked, I don’t even think wrong. I never went to but one ball in my youth, and then nobody cared to dance with me; yet I see no harm in dancing, or in pleasant society, while I see a great deal of harm in shutting young people up in a strictly virtuous and morbid seclusion till you nearly send them melancholy mad, or else drive them to marry the very first person they meet who hates your own “views.” I am far from believing it is necessary to salvation to make life, still less religion, a bore. I see harm in tedious commentaries, in offensively affectionate tracts, and infinite harm in the peculiar language. I see infinite harm in all that can make religion either distasteful, or tiresome, or ludicrous, or vulgarly familiar, or blasphemous. I hate, too, a theology, whether it be high or low, which holds narrow, unsympathetic “views,” and is always bothering about nasty little imperceptible sins and

small pettifogging virtues. Let us be a little sinful or a little good without knowing it !

From living so much amongst "Lights" and morbidising in a strictly virtuous seclusion, I myself have got the habit of looking into every one and through every one to see what the man, and especially the woman, is made of. It has become a habit of mind with me, and I often do it without knowing it, and even to myself. Perhaps it is this trick of petty analysis, contracted whilst living in a nutshell, which has disgusted me with the smaller sins and lesser virtues. I am particularly irritated by the odds and ends of a petty virtue. There is a whole pack of little botherations I think neither wrong nor right, and this is the reason why my Aunts Jane and Arabella, and all Lights, are convinced I can have no good principles whatever. Yet the few things I do think right, I think very right ; and the few I believe to be wrong, seem very wrong to me. I have concentrated my convictions of right and wrong upon a few clearly defined points. Thus I believe in the holiness of marriage,—I believe that whom God hath joined together, it is wicked in any way to put asunder. This is one of my few, but strong and very clear convictions.

Belief, fervent belief, is often born of the heart as well as of the mind. Thus none believe in God like those who love Him. Love believes twice over. I was convinced, and loved to be convinced, of the ever-binding nature and sanctity of the marriage tie. The idea of two lives blended for help and comfort and mutual

joy into one, seemed a thought of divine origin to me who had felt there was no satisfaction in life without sympathy of mind and heart, and some one to love better than myself.

In this my faith as to what God intended man and wife to be, I found an ideal that I loved. Any thought or action which debased this high ideal was most distasteful to me. The low trick of a husband exciting his wife's jealousy or the wife her husband's, destroyed to my mind the trust and beauty and noble dignity of married life. Flirtation, if at all real, I thought wicked; if unreal, it jarred with my ideal, and was to me a coarse, vile, vulgar thing. I saw no poetry in it, no high delight; and by its side even cold and thankless duty suffering much, seemed beautiful.

I abhorred the notion Lady Arabella had tried to put into my mind. No one ever hated to have their few ideals sullied more than I do.

The intense loathing I felt for Lady Arabella's suggestion, produced a violent revulsion towards David within me. David's aunt could not have invented any better way of moving me strongly in his favour, or of wiping out her former hints. I was ashamed, even for a moment, to have entertained suspicion. I looked back with remorse and scorn on the unworthy doubts which I had weakly let enter my mind.

When I met David, I felt like a traitor; for it was not until I saw him that I knew how much I loved him. I heard his voice again, and I believed in him

with all my heart and soul. I could not firmly meet his eye for shame at having doubted him.

He said to me—"Sophy, you are quite shy with me; as if I were a stranger! Yet I think you and I have met before!" And he laughed heartily.

David was in pleasant spirits, and laid himself out to talk delightfully. He seemed to be repenting agreeably, for he declared it was a shame to have left me so long alone with Aunt Jane. At the same time, he appeared to be quite proud of his own admirable conduct in having returned to me, "for London is so awfully slow at this time of year." He said Mrs Clownton had bothered him to stay on longer in the north, but that he "could not stand that intriguing woman any longer." When I questioned him as to the cause of his dislike, he told me she was "rehearsing matches" for everybody, and I gathered that she was particularly engaged in making up a match behind the scenes for Louisa Clarke and a certain Mr Verrard.

"They don't seem to think," said David, "the Tankney affair will ever come off, and so much the better! The girl does not care a straw for him! How could she?"

"Then," I replied, "if Louisa does not really intend to marry Mr Tankney, Mrs Clownton may perhaps be excused for thinking she might marry some one else." David declared it was the sort of fellow Mrs Clownton had chosen which made her conduct so outrageous; and he gave me a lively description of a perfectly

hateful man, and worked himself almost into a passion as he spoke. His anger surprised me, and I told him I could not imagine why he went to the trouble of detesting this Mr Verrard. He then vowed he was perfectly indifferent to the fellow, who might marry Louisa for all he cared,—he did not care! not he! In fact, he contradicted himself flatly.

He quickly changed the conversation, and proceeded to give me an amusing account of the private theatricals; but I particularly remarked, though Louisa had acted the part of heroine in "Our Young Swells," that he barely mentioned her, and then not to praise her. I noticed this, and was ashamed to remember I had ever cast a jealous thought upon her. David was very amusing. His wit could make the most commonplace story an enchanting delight. It fascinated me all the more, because I had been infinitely bored for nearly three months. Until I heard David speak, I had feared with a great fear that I should have nothing to say to him. My spirits had felt broken and my intellects paralysed by being so much with Aunt Jane. I had feared my wearied mind could never grow young again, and I had dreaded David would find me hopelessly dull, and perhaps not like me as much as he used to do; but as I listened to him, the miracle which had taken place that first time at Mineham was performed once more. My mind awoke, and I grew young again. His wit inspired me, and I felt as if it were my own, for David has the art of making you feel you are as agreeable as he is. En-

chanting delusion ! Ah ! thought I ; one lively sinner in a house is worth ten righteous men, and twenty-five righteous women !

David talked ; we both talked and we laughed ; David certainly talked the most, or perhaps he would not have said to me as he did—" Well, Sophy, we have spent a very lively evening. You are the most agreeable person I know."

It was not until I heard him say these words, that I really knew how intensely I had dreaded I might bore him. To his surprise and mine, tears filled my voice, and I exclaimed—" Oh, Davie, Davie ! never tire of me, but think me pleasant to the last !"

CHAPTER X.

NOTWITHSTANDING her twenty-five correspondents, Lady Arabella showed she was not indifferent to the pleasure of securing a twenty-sixth. Although I had parted from her in anger, before three days were past she forgot this and forgave me, and wrote to me affectionately, because she had news to tell me—news which could not interest any of the twenty-five as much as it could me. “Mrs Thunderbore,” she wrote, “has *just* been here. She could not stay a *moment*, and only *ran* into the house and *ran* out again, but she said she felt she *must* come and tell us the astounding report which is *all over* the county, and which *every one* has heard, and which *every one* is talking about. It was kind of her, *je l’avoue*, to rush off here immediately, but she said she knew poor dear Mrs Sherbrook would be dreadfully sorry to hear the news, so she thought the *sooner* she heard it the better. And indeed, your poor dear aunt is in a sad state, and can talk of *nothing* else. She says she thought Catherine Stewart was *so* attached to the place, and she gets *much* excited for fear the property should not be sold to a *truly*

Christian landlord, and one her poor dear husband would thoroughly have approved of. *Du reste*, it seems one report says Catherine has *already* SOLD Sherbrook Hall, and another *contradicts* this, and a *third* declares Mr Rigardy-Wrenstone has persuaded my cousin Hartmoor to bid for the place, while a *fourth* states Sir John Moultrie has *actually* bought it by *private contract*. Mrs Thunderbore told us all these reports, because she said she thought we should like to know them, though for *her part*, she believed the *only certain fact* in the whole matter is, that Catherine Stewart has put Sherbrook Hall up for sale, and intends to leave the county as soon *as possible*. Mrs Thunderbore said Mrs James Sherbrook told her Mrs Wrenstone won't *even speak* to Catherine *now*. And I am *not* surprised ! for whatever Mrs Rigardy-Wrenstone may be, she is certainly a *perfectly honourable* woman, and I *know* she thinks Catherine has behaved in a *very unprincipled* manner. Not that Mrs Wrenstone could prevent Catherine from being received in the *best* houses if I were willing society should take her up, but as you are aware, *ma chère*, I am *determined* society shall drop her, so the sooner she leaves the county *tant mieux pour elle !*"

David laughed very much at this. "So like Aunt Arabella!" he said; "but I would back your admirable Catherine to get into society and keep there in spite of my lady, if she wished it! She has plenty of money now, and is quite clever enough to entertain the right people in the right way. By Jove! I doubt

if she will let herself be turned out of Dullshire, for the clever lady has taken a precious deal of trouble to get a footing there! She has been humbugging the county for the last ten years, and pretty hard work she has had, I should say."

"All the same, she may be going, David. The admirable Catherine never pitches her tent upon unpleasant ground. I know her well!" I exclaimed; "she is a wonderful old general, and can camp afresh without casting a thought upon lost dykes and ditches."

David did not agree with me. He said regular campaigners hated to leave their old entrenchments. But I said—"She is not one of the common sort, David. On the contrary, I dare say she already spies a new 'field' before her where more brilliant victories can be won than she has ever gained as yet. Oh! I can imagine how that eye of hers will open with her fortune! Now that she has got Sherbrook Hall, I know she will despise it and see beyond! I thoroughly believe she will sell the place, and take the money and be free. As to former friends, she will rather like being cut by them, for she won't care to flatter the smaller people any more. Catch her getting cooks for anybody now!"

Lady Arabella wrote me a second letter before I could answer her first. "Oh, David!" I exclaimed, on opening it, "something extraordinary must have happened. The letter is only two pages long!" I read—

"MY DEAREST SOPHY,—Come here immediately, *immediately!* Poor, dear Mrs Sherbrook says the *same* thing *over and over again!* and seems *strangely* excited. Dr Daly says it is the effect of the *shock*, and that she has a *threatening* of *paralysis*, but he thinks *with care* the attack may be *avoided*. If it *had been Hartmoor* or *Sir John*, she would not have taken the matter to heart like this. I think your Aunt Jane will only irritate David, so leave him *behind*, but make him promise *on his honour* to stay *quietly at home* while you are away. Tell him you will be back again in a few days.—Dearest Sophy, believe me to be, in great haste, your affectionate aunt,

" ARABELLA SCOTT.

" *P.S.*—I see I have *accidentally* omitted to tell you it is a person called *Samuel Jones*, some sort of *Australian* brother of that pock-marked *Jack Jones*, the *farmer*, who has *bought* Sherbrook Hall!!! Sir John offered *exactly* the *same sum*, but they say Catherine closed with this Jones's offer *solely* to *pique* the *county people*, who *naturally* would have preferred *Sir John Moultrie*.—With love to David, your affectionate aunt,

ARABELLA SCOTT.

" *P.S.*—There is to be an *auction* at Sherbrook Hall *to-morrow*, and Mrs Thunderbore says *everything* is to be sold, *even the carriage horses!*—Your affectionate aunt,

ARABELLA SCOTT.

" *P.S.*—I sent for Dr Daly *without* your aunt's know-

ledge, but she will *not* see him again, and seems to have *no* faith in his system.—Yours affectionately,

“A. SCOTT.”

I agreed with Lady Arabella. Aunt Jane would irritate David. I could imagine how she would talk incessantly on the one subject which had possession of her poor brain!

Had Aunt Jane not maddened David when she was in her right senses, I thought he might have borne with her now: unfortunately she had proved so wrong-headed long ago! If she were now really paralysed, or quite foolish, I knew he would be very kind to her; but if only, as I expected, a little more irritating and tearful and huffy, and slightly more illogical than usual, I feared his pity for her would soon die, as it had died before. I could not bear to think he might dislike her in her debased sort of grief and feebleness.

I stood holding the letter in my hand, silently thinking these thoughts and feeling these fears. David had read the note with me. He broke the silence. I looked at him and listened. The instant I turned towards him he hesitated, stopped short, and said no more.

“What is it, David?” I asked, and, like a fool, half hoped he might say he could not let me go alone to Mineham, but would come too. I thought I should like to hear such words, merely for the pleasure they would give me.

“What is it, David?”

He still hesitated; then hemmed and hawed, and said—“Well . . . well . . . ahem! Look here, Sophy! . . . Well, perhaps . . . perhaps you had better read it yourself.” And he pulled a letter out of an inner coat pocket: giving it to me he added—“It would only be for a clear day. You won’t be away long, and I should certainly be back to meet you.”

The letter was from Mrs Augustus Clownton—it was asking David to take the night mail “on the sly, if *necessary*,” and run down to Scotland just to act “Lord Chawles once more—only once more! The last representation of *Our Young Swells*! *positively* the last! The last, the very last appearance of Lord Chawles and the Honourable Gwendoline! Lady Clarke,” wrote Mrs Clownton, “having taken Sir Henry up to town to *consult the doctors*, we shall have the house to ourselves, and no *end of fun*! *You* must come! Now, *positively*, you *must*! No one can take your part, my dear Mr Scott, but *you*! You are *perfection*! *Absolute* perfection! and you must manage, *no matter how*, to get leave.”

I disliked the tone of this letter; however, I did not say so. I folded it up quietly, and gave it back to David. I asked—“Do you wish to go?”

“Well . . .” he answered, “ahem! rather awkward fix! no one to take my part!”

“I thought,” said I, “that you hated this Mrs Clownton?”

“By Jove! so I do! But I need not see any more

of her than I like, . . . and . . . it's . . . deuced awkward, Sophy, to stop the whole thing just because there is no fellow who can take your own part! deuced awkward! I should let them get any screw they could, if you were not going to Mineham; but as you are off, Sophy, I might as well be off too, instead of knocking about town all alone."

"Have you only just got Mrs Clownton's letter?" I asked, for I had noticed the date was old.

"Let me see?" cried David, as if he did not well remember, "was it yesterday I got it? No, now that I come to think, I must have got it two or three days ago. I . . . I did not show it to you before, did I?"

There was an embarrassment in David's manner which struck me as very odd. I could not imagine why there should be any mystery or secret about Mrs Clownton's letter. I looked at David in inquiring amazement. He seemed ashamed of something. Whilst my eyes thus questioned him, he got up, and standing before me, he looked with his brilliant eyes into mine. He took my hand and smiled. "Sophy," said he, "what a fool I am to think you can ever believe anything but the real truth! I got the letter five days ago, and could not quite make up my mind to say no, and yet I was not such a heartless fellow as to say yes, and leave you, when we had hardly met again."

"We had been a long time parted, David," said I, clasping my other hand over his.

"Sophy," he said, gravely, "I don't care to go. I

will stay here while you are away, and not go if you wish it. I know," he added, smiling, "half the wives don't like their husbands to go about without them, and, by Jove! perhaps they are right!"

I thought a minute. David's hand still lay in both of mine. My upraised eyes saw nothing but kindly love looking down upon me with a clear, true gaze; and again my whole heart believed in David. "Go, Davie, go," said I, gently. "There is perfect faith and trust between us. No mean thought must ever come to you or me."

David and I parted with these words living between us—he went to the North, and I to Mineham.

I found Aunt Jane exactly in the state I had expected. She dragged her leg, and spoke perhaps a little more indistinctly than usual, but I was glad to find that she was not as she had been that day we left Sherbrook Hall. There was no obliteration of memory; on the contrary, her mind was too excited, being nervously, tyrannically possessed by the fact that Sherbrook Hall, her home, and poor dear Edward's, was sold to a man who is "not a gentleman, Sophy! but only a brother of Jack Jones, and Edward never, never thought Jack Jones a gentleman at all, and Edward was such a proud man! oh, such a very proud man! and poor, poor dear Edward! what would he say? And, Sophy, I think Samuel Jones will buy in all the old furniture, and poor dear Edward's own arm-chair, which was always in the study, and mine too, and Edward's desk where he kept his most important

papers, and Samuel Jones will be sure to buy the drawing-room chairs, and the round table in the middle of the room; and he will buy everything! and he won't care for anything! and I thought Catherine was so attached to the furniture, and she always admired the round table so much, because she often said she was just like me, and never could bear those sort of tables with claws underneath."

I saw the best chance of soothing Aunt Jane was to entice her mind to think about the auction, and I led her to hope I might possibly get the round table for her. I sent off an express messenger to Mr Jones, the attorney, begging him to buy it for me, as well as the drawing-room chairs, and the two arm-chairs, and the desk in Uncle Sherbrook's study. The hope of having these things once more, engrossed my aunt's mind, and therefore weakened the hold of the first impression. Mrs Thunderbore had told her the news about the sale of Sherbrook Hall too suddenly—the shock had fixed the one idea in power, and paralysed all other thoughts.

The whole of the next day, from morning till night, Aunt Jane kept wondering about the auction, and went from hope to fear, and from fear to hope. If Samuel Jones did not buy the round table, she seemed to think the whole county would want to have it. Aunt Jane talked incessantly, and, strange to say, Lady Arabella managed to talk also. I gave her one ear, and Aunt Jane the other. Both ladies were delighted to have caught what looked like a listener. Lady

Arabella kept up a little running stream about auctions and heirlooms, and old family places that were sold principally because the wrong people had married the wrong people, who in their turn had children who would not marry heiresses. Aunt Jane's flowing stream did not interfere with Lady Arabella's rivulet. The two ladies talked together, yet neither seemed aware of it. They did not speak loud—they really talked to themselves, but each one thought she was talking to me. I kept up the illusion with an occasional "indeed!" and a sympathetic nod of my head given first to the one and then to the other.

I was glad to find both aunts could talk together, as I had feared this might be impossible, and I should have felt much grieved had Lady Arabella been forced to keep silence. She did not deserve so great a trial, for her kindness to Aunt Jane could not be exceeded. She actually insisted the chairs and table should be brought from the auction to Mineham, though, fearing to inconvenience her, I had proposed they should be sent to Aunt Jane's house in Montagu Square. Lady Arabella said truly—"My dear Sophy, believe me, the mere sight of that table and those chairs will soothe the poor dear Mrs Sherbrook's nervous excitement. I myself could not live without my old Chippendale—*c'est une passion!*"

Accordingly our kind hostess gave orders that the table and the chairs were to be brought into the house early in the morning, while Aunt Jane was still in bed. When my aunt came down-stairs on that memorable

morning she found the chairs and the round table all arranged in Lady Arabella's drawing-room.

The study arm-chairs and the desk were placed during the forenoon in Aunt Jane's own bedroom.

My aunt's joy at the sight of the table without claws and the well-worn chairs was of a peculiar kind. It surprised me, for the first excitement over, she became quite silent. She examined the table minutely, and went down on her knees to feel the one straight leg, and to see if any of the casters underneath were lost. She then walked round the room slowly from chair to chair, examining each one. At last she chose the one chair in which she had sat every evening of her life at Sherbrook Hall. Aunt Jane liked always to sit in the same seat at the same hour, and so did Uncle Sherbrook. I think the custom became a part of the serious method of their life.

Aunt Jane now carried her own chair across the room—she would not let me touch it. Notwithstanding her lameness, she would carry it herself. She put it at the left side of the fire, and exactly two yards from it. At Sherbrook Hall her chair used always to be placed two yards from the fender, and to the left of the fire. My aunt then sat down, and leaning back, she sighed and shut her eyes. She opened them again to fix them on the round table. She sighed and remained strangely contented for a full quarter of an hour. At last she said—"Sophy, Sherbrook Hall is certainly the driest house in England!" She sighed again. "The furniture is not a bit spoiled! It is just as it

was when poor dear Edward died ! There never could be so dry a house as Sherbrook ! never ! And, Sophy, the place used to agree with me so well, and with poor dear Edward too !” Again she sighed and relapsed into silence. She only broke it to say, “Sophy, that table is a wonderful improvement to the room !” Now, this it decidedly was not : it was ugly in itself, and was placed in too prominent a position. When Lady Arabella came down, just before luncheon, she wished to have it pushed more out of the way, but she saw, and it was easy to see it, that Aunt Jane felt aggrieved and pained ; so Lady Arabella most good-naturedly let the eyesore remain where it was. She even seemed amused by Aunt Jane’s contented contemplation of as ugly a piece of furniture as you could well see.

In a distant corner of the drawing-room, Lady Arabella had a considerable collection of improving little books, bound in red, in blue, and in bright-brown covers, all with gilt edges. She never read these books—nobody ever read them. They were presentation copies of various small discourses “printed by special desire ;” poems “printed by special desire ;” and tracts, more than half of which were merely Sambo bound in blue and gold, brown and gold, or red and gold—the rest were such things as ‘Betsy-Anne’s Way,’ ‘Manchester Moll’s Dustbin,’ ‘Liverpool Tom’s Sunday Treat,’ ‘Blasphemous Jack’s Revival,’ ‘The Costermonger’s Call, or, the Tract in the Cabbage-Leaf.’ These also were bound as Blasphemous Jack might have bound his books before his revival.

Aunt Jane had several times sanctified her knees with some of this sweetly-precious literature while she took an afternoon or evening nap, so she knew of the existence of these little books. After luncheon she said she did not care to go out, but begged Lady Arabella would kindly allow her to "settle" her own table instead. The "settling" consisted in placing a little red book, a little blue book, a little brown book; a little red book, a little blue book, a little brown book; a little red book, a little blue book, a little brown book,—all round the table, till the frightful object looked exactly as it used to look at Sherbrook Hall.

In the hurry of leaving her old home, Aunt Jane had left her own 'Blasphemous Jacks' and 'Manchester Molls' behind her. She now sadly feared her little treasures had been sold; she wondered what had been sold and what had not. She was dying to hear about the auction. Having found her tongue again, she wondered unceasingly on the inexhaustible subject, while Lady Arabella wondered if Mrs Thunderbore would manage to find time "just to run in for half a second and tell us the news.

To the excitement and delight of both ladies, Mrs Thunderbore did at last find time to "run in," but only for two minutes. However, she managed to stay two hours.

Mrs Thunderbore is a worthy specimen of the second-rate clerical lady. She is a good woman, and is very kind to the poor; and yet they tell me

the poor think very little of her and of her kindness : She is liked, but certainly deserves to be more liked than she is.

From what I hear, Dullshire peasants are not naturally grateful : they are, too, a silent people, who respect silence as if it were a dignified virtue. Now I know poor Mrs Thunderbore goes through the parish talking volubly to every one, and giving everybody a quantity of sound advice about his or her affairs, temporal and spiritual, and both mixed up together : she smells bad smells, looks into cupboards, tastes food unasked, condemns the cookery, suggests improvements, and advises parents to correct their children more judiciously ; she runs in and out of the cottages in the most familiar way, and never sits down quietly anywhere, but is always trotting. She trots about in the queerest cut and very shortest petticoats, and wears a singularly ugly brown mushroom hat on her head, with rosettes over her ears, and brown strings, the worse for wear, under her chin. She has two little girls whom she dresses exactly in every respect like herself, rosettes and all ! Mrs Thunderbore considers rosettes "sensible ;" she is greatly afraid of the ear-ache, and would like to make the whole village dread it as much as she does.

When you meet her in Klipton, she looks as if she were a good heavy dogma, got loose from one of her husband's dull sermons, with two smaller but sound little dogmas at her heels.

On Sundays Mrs Thunderbore wears a brown bonnet, as like the mushroom hat as a bonnet can be to a hat: she sets a good example to the village. But the young women never look at her bonnet! They only look at Lady Arabella's. Lady Arabella is very popular in Klipton, and I fully believe much of her popularity is due to the reputation she has got of wearing her best bonnet in church.

Mrs Thunderbore has only two children. Lady Arabella says, "*Ma chère, elle n'a pas eu le temps d'en avoir d'autres.*" This is just one of the little remarks for which her ladyship considers the French language to have been especially invented. *eu/*

Mrs Thunderbore never comes to Mineham unless she has some news to tell: she knows her mushroom hat and costume will not then be noticed. At other times I cannot help thinking the poor woman feels she is too great a figure to be quite acceptable to Lady Arabella. The mistress of Mineham particularly dislikes a very skimping skirt.

However, on the day I speak of Mrs Thunderbore entered full of self-confidence. She did not even go to the trouble of undoing the clamps which caught up the back of her dress, half a mile above her old linsey petticoat. By the height of her dress I could always calculate the amount of gossip the good lady brought to Mineham, and this day I perceived there was no end to it!

Mrs Thunderbore protesting she could not stay two minutes, was in the midst of the auction before

she had time to sit down. I drew a chair for her between Aunt Jane and Lady Arabella, and she took it unawares. There she sat, happily forgetful of her appearance, and quite at her ease, for Lady Arabella looked as much interested in the auction as Aunt Jane.

Mrs Thunderbore had been to the auction herself. She did not let her husband go—he was not to be trusted; his wife said the last time she had let him go to an auction, he had brought home an odd tong and an embroidered satin cushion: the tong was cheap, but the cushion was dear, and both were useless.

At the Sherbrook sale Mrs Thunderbore had bought the study carpet, the dining-room curtains, one of the dining-room sideboards, a wash-hand basin and jug, two new saucepans, and three old ones.

Aunt Jane was quite grieved to hear how little she had given for the curtains and carpet, the jug and basin, and even for the three old saucepans; the low price fetched by the new ones shocked her! The sideboard was the only one of these purchases which my aunt could think at all a fair bargain.

“But I should have got the sideboard for half the sum,” cried Mrs Thunderbore, “if it had not been for Mr Buggle, the attorney. Somebody told him I was buying the sideboard for you, Mrs Scott, and he bid against me! Every one said he ought to have been ashamed of himself, and so he ought! Why, Mrs Sherbrook, you would have got that round

table there for nothing, only for Mr Buggle. He heard Mr Jones, the Harefield attorney, was buying it for Mrs Scott, so he ran up the price to double the right value."

"Scandalous impudence!" exclaimed Lady Arabella, indignantly. But Aunt Jane said—"Indeed, Mrs Thunderbore, Sophy did not give a bit too much for the round table. It is a very valuable table! very! and Mr Buggle knows it is, because he is a very clever man, and I think he was quite right not to let your sideboard go for nothing, especially as poor dear Edward's green bear is painted all over it." I saw Mr Buggle had risen immensely in Aunt Jane's favour. Had he but doubled the price of the carpet and dining-room curtains, I think he might actually have become a "poor dear"!

Mrs Thunderbore and Lady Arabella looked at Aunt Jane in much amazement; she puzzled them greatly. But Mrs Thunderbore was accustomed to go through the parish and through life without clearly understanding most people or many things, so she recovered from her astonishment the first, and went on just as before, telling us who had bought this and who had bought that, and what the different things went for.

Aunt Jane was very minute in her inquiries. The technical power of Mrs Thunderbore's memory surprised me. She remembered every scrap of furniture, every little cup and saucer, and did not once forget the purchaser.

"Who bought my bedroom curtains?" asked Aunt Jane.

"Your old maid, Sarah Snipkins, Mrs Sherbrook."

"Snipkins always admired them! she always did!" exclaimed my aunt, looking pleased to think they had fallen to one who would appreciate them.

"They sold well," said Mrs Thunderbore; "Sarah Snipkins had to give quite a good price for them."

"Snipkins knew their value! Poor dear Snipkins!" sighed Aunt Jane. This exclamation renewed the surprise of both her listeners.

Mrs Thunderbore was again the first to pass over her astonishment and go on as before. Her voluble memory seemed to have no end. The "two minutes" grew into an hour. The first hour was fast becoming a second, and yet Mrs Thunderbore talked on! She not only remembered what had been sold at the auction and who had bought it, but also recollected the personal history of the purchaser: in this personal and family history Lady Arabella invariably joined.

Mrs Thunderbore knew why most of the purchasers bought what they did buy, and did not buy something else. Aunt Jane was much interested to hear why Snipkins had bought the curtains. Mrs Thunderbore said Snipkins was reported to be a lady of fortune, who intended retiring to a house of her own. Aunt Jane wondered where she would live, and supposed she would live in Harefield or in Votlingham.

"Oh, dear no! dear no! Mrs Sherbrook! my housemaid tells me it is said in Harefield that Mrs

Sherbrook-Stewart has promised Sarah Snipkins £200 a-year, on condition that she settles somewhere quite away from Dullshire. They say Mrs Stewart is afraid of her gossiping about important matters to neighbours, who having the clue, might understand her."

"Indeed," said Aunt Jane, warmly, "Snipkins never gossiped to any one! never! and she was always exceedingly useful to me, and had her Bible at her finger-ends, and always gave me the right things at the right time, and never gave me my cuffs before my collar, and poor dear Snipkins!—I get on very badly without her! and I never really feel comfortable, and Mrs Thunderbore, I always found her a perfectly honest, sober, trustworthy, Christian-minded woman."

The clergyman's wife pushed back her hat as if it prevented her seeing, and I had almost said, hearing, clearly. She gazed at Aunt Jane with wide-open eyes: she evidently heard a very different account of Snipkins from her housemaid.

I had great hopes astonishment might silence Mrs Thunderbore, and at last bring the "two minutes' " visit to a close. Aunt Jane was getting over-excited. She had been much agitated at hearing all her old furniture, and "poor dear Edward's," had been sold as if it were worth nothing, and to people who would not care for it! There was much that touched me in Aunt Jane's love for her old carpets and curtains and sideboards and tea-cups; even her funny way of idealising the table without claws, and the draw-

ing-room chairs, had its pathetic side. I could understand, and therefore wellnigh share, an affection for ugly objects which had been companions in the happiest hours of life. I understood they might be like old friends, whose faces we forget to criticise.

I wished Mrs Thunderbore to take leave and say no more. She had said enough. But the good lady had yet more to tell—she generally kept a rather important or interesting little bit to give out as a last word. It was a habit of hers.

“All the carriages were sold, Mrs Sherbrook!” she exclaimed, rising from her chair; “and Mrs Stewart even sold her mule cart.”

“Who bought the close carriage?” asked my aunt.

“Samuel Jones,” was the answer.

“Samuel Jones!” repeated Aunt Jane, turning very red; “I wonder if *he* will use Edward’s crest and arms?”

Mrs Thunderbore said good-bye, and was half-way to the door, when she turned round, exclaiming—“Oh, Mrs Sherbrook! do you know Jack Jones bought that bay mare which poor Mr Sherbrook used to take such care of, and they say old Jack will drive her to market twice a-week, and that she will never be seen under a gentleman’s carriage again!”

To Mrs Thunderbore’s surprise—dismay!—Aunt Jane burst into tears. “He will kill the bay mare! he will kill her!” she sobbed; “she is very delicate, very! and poor dear Edward took such care of her,

such care! and he always knew how she was, and so did Robert! And Jack Jones won't mind if she is well or ill! he won't mind! for he is not a gentleman. Poor dear Edward! what would he say? Sophy, what would your uncle say?"

"He will not know, Aunt Jane, dear," said I; and I smiled, for at that moment I could see Uncle Sherbrook as he used to look, walking up the level hills on the Klipton road. "He will not hear of the bay mare where he is now, or care if the incessant trouble he took about that horse, like half the trouble we take in life, was all in vain!"

"You don't care, Sophy!" sobbed my aunt; "you never cared about the bay mare, never! because you like to go full gallop everywhere!"

Though I had smiled, I did care, and, strange as it may seem, I could have cried! I was ashamed to feel the weakness, ashamed to weep, because everything my uncle had hoarded with careful worry had passed into the hands of callous strangers! Yet the thought that this should be so, now he was dead, touched me.

At the first outburst of Aunt Jane's tears, Mrs Thunderbore had stood transfixed, and then had disappeared. She now came running back to the room carrying an overflowing glass of water, and she insisted Aunt Jane should drink it, drink it all, drink every drop of it! while she made Lady Arabella hold a smelling bottle to my aunt's nostril, and desired me to chafe her hands. The water was

upset, but Aunt Jane dried her tears a happier woman, for she was certainly a little pleased to have had a fit of hysterics which it took three people to cure. "I feel things more than most people," she said to Mrs Thunderbore, "and far more than Sophy, and I always did! I always did!"

She leant on Mrs Thunderbore's arm, and was placed by her in her own particular Sherbrook chair. The kindly, goody-body then wiped the spilt water from the front of her own dress with the hem of her skirt. Lady Arabella's attention was drawn to Mrs Thunderbore's petticoats, and her ladyship visibly shuddered. Mrs Thunderbore immediately said good-bye.

With a short interval for dinner, Aunt Jane remained in her own chair all the evening. She was tired from excitement; so having sanctified her knee with one of the blue-and-gold little books from the round table, she fell quietly asleep.

"Poor dear Mrs Sherbrook!" exclaimed Lady Arabella in a kind of half whisper,—a sort of whisper which sounded very much like a sigh of relief; "poor dear Mrs Sherbrook! she is asleep! so come, Sophy, and you and I will have a little chat together. Come nearer, my dear, nearer, just a little nearer, Sophy!"

I drew as near to her as she wished. She looked exceedingly astonished to see me so ready to chat with her. The truth is, I no longer cared what she might say to me about David. I had no fear of

being disturbed by any suspicion she might try to give me, for my trust in David was a calm faith, a living joy within me, which no one but he himself could kill. I was actually glad to gossip with Lady Arabella,—even to gossip about David, if she liked it. I well knew a little gossip about near and dear relations pleases an old lady very much, and I was glad to be able to do anything, no matter what, which might please her. Her sympathetic kindness to Aunt Jane had made me quite fond of her.

With all her failings, and she has many of them, Lady Arabella is yet a very kind-hearted woman; one willing to be sympathetic, and caring enough for people to trouble her head about them, though, no doubt, she also cares to know a little more of their private affairs than may be altogether necessary for the satisfaction of mere Christian sympathy and charity. I confessed to myself that if you must live amongst *Lights*, the *Light* with the little vanities and humanities of life, would be a pleasanter companion than the hardened saint, whose selfishness is often so cruelly unsympathetic. The little vanities are very human. We feel they are a bit of our own nature, so most of us find it easy to forgive them.

Since I had grown to like Lady Arabella, I could not find it in my heart to snub her curiosity, for although she does pride herself on her tact, and does not pride herself upon her natural inquisitiveness, I knew the curiosity was by far the stronger instinct of the two.

As a satisfaction to her own exquisite sense of

tact, Lady Arabella approached the question she particularly wished to ask with an amusing amount of roundabout. Taking many turns in the air, her lengthening swoop brought her at last to the point with which she might just as well have begun, since I saw where she was coming all the time. She inquired affectionately for David's health, and then said, "David . . . David is . . . is not in London, my dear, is he? I think he is in Scotland."

"Yes; he is in Scotland."

"Staying with those Clarcke girls and their . . . their rather questionable chaperone, Mrs Augustus Clownton?"

"Yes; he is staying with them."

There was a slight pause, and slight embarrassment on Lady Arabella's part: she fumbled in the velvet bag she wore attached to her waistband. "Sophy, I . . . I received a letter from Julia Horston this morning. She . . . she happens to be staying at the Clarckes'."

"Indeed!" said I, but I gave Lady Arabella no encouragement.

"Perhaps . . . perhaps, Sophy, you had better read this letter." And she forced Miss Horston's letter into my hand. "There! there!" she said, pointing to the part I was to read. I saw,—“There is some very pretty love-making in the piece we are acting, and nothing can be more lifelike than the love-scene between your nephew Mr David Scott and Louisa Clarcke. It is just as well he is married, my dear

Lady Arabella, or the situation might be dangerous, as Louisa is the most perfect flirt in her own quiet style, and really Mr Scott is by no means such a very difficult man to flirt with. Louisa is by way of being engaged to that son of Lord Tankney's, but she does not care a bit for him, and he is always running after Lady Offaway, so no one expects the marriage will take place. Lady Clarke is in despair! and wants Louisa to marry Mr Verrard, the well-known 'Jim,' *the* great catch up here. Sir Henry objects to the gentleman, as he has already been run away with by one married lady. Lady Clarke has therefore taken Sir Henry up to town to *consult the doctors*, though I cannot see he has anything the matter with him. Mrs Clownton has been left here in charge of the match-making, and a wonderful match-maker she is! She declares she has *promised* Lady Clarke that Louisa shall marry Mr Verrard, and she tells me she is under no end of obligations to Lady Clarke, though she will not tell me what they are. I am dying to know! and I wonder if Lady Clarke can give her money to chaperone her daughters while she is away. I am sure she gives her dresses, for Mrs Clownton always wears the most magnificent forty and fifty guinea gowns, and I know 'my poor Augustus,' as she calls Mr Clownton, will hardly give her a penny. Mrs Clownton tells Louisa to flirt with David Scott, so as to make Jim Verrard jealous. She wants her to make him *frightfully* jealous! She is afraid to tell Louisa to flirt with an unmarried man, for fear Louisa might take it into her head to marry the gentleman.

Mrs Clownton told me all this *herself*. My dear Lady Arabella, she *is* an odd woman!" In returning this letter, I simply said nothing.

"Sophy," whispered Lady Arabella, "why did not you telegraph for me? for if you could not make David stay at home, perhaps I might have done so, my dear—I have some tact with young men." I replied that I had not tried to prevent David from going to Scotland.

"Not tried to prevent him, Sophy?"

"No," said I proudly, rising and drawing myself up to my full height,—“no! I told him to go. I wished him to go. I believe in David, Aunt Arabella; I trust him; I believe in him with all my heart and soul!”

Lady Arabella clasped her hands, and exclaimed in mingled disgust and despair, “Sophy, Sophy! I have seen that sort of romance tried in my youth, and it was not found to answer. You are mad! Yes, Sophy! you are mad!”

“Not mad now,” I said; “but recovered from madness! I was mad, Aunt Arabella, ever for one moment to have doubted the man I love best in this world.”

But Lady Arabella only repeated with angry vehemence, “Sophy, you are mad! You are mad!”

Her exclamations awoke Aunt Jane, who opened her eyes, asking, “Whose voice do I hear? Are they selling the bay mare?”

CHAPTER XI.

I LEFT Mineham next day. David arrived in town the following morning.

It was with great delight that I met David. This time there was no cloud upon my joy, for my conscience was clear. My pleasure was increased by thinking that now, at last, we were going to spend a long life together. I foresaw no more separation awaiting us.

I was in so happy and joyful a state of mind myself, that I did not immediately perceive David was out of spirits. Indeed, at first, he talked to my talking, and laughed to my laughter, and I thought him just as agreeable as ever. But in a day or two, with wondering concern, I noticed an effort in his liveliness.

When the novelty of our meeting was over, he became absent, even silent. Once or twice, to my unspeakable astonishment, he was quite irritable, and irritable about a mere nothing. I handed him a letter one morning, and he angrily wished I would leave his letters alone. David's crossness startled me; though soon he made me wellnigh forget his hasty words, by

repenting agreeably. Yet I took care not to give him his letters any more.

He generally left his letters tossing open about the house ; but this letter, and one which he received some ten days afterwards, he put into his pocket immediately, and never alluded to. My curiosity was excited. I hate mysteries, especially in a small house where two people are perpetually thrown together : so I determined to ask David what high treason he was concocting, and who was his fellow-conspirator. Were I five minutes alone, I had asked him the question at least once in every minute, and with the greatest possible ease ; yet the instant David came into the room, I found it the most difficult question in the whole world to ask. I could not ask it.

David was very irritable for some days after he received the second letter. All sorts of unexpected little things annoyed him. He was in a fault-finding humour, and his eye seemed to perceive and be disgusted by what it had seen till now without offence. The dress I had worn nearly every day during our honeymoon suddenly displeased his taste. He railed against the cut of it, against its colour. I laughed at him, only to discover he was more than half in earnest. He wondered I did not get a gown like one he rather oddly described ; but when I asked him where he had seen it, he said he hated to be cross-questioned about ladies' dresses, that he knew nothing about them, and that they were all the same to his eye ; he only knew when a lady looked well and when she did not ; he

knew that no one looked well in an unbecoming dress ; and he said if a person had a big waist she ought not to wear a band round it ; and as he spoke, I saw him look at my belt. He had never noticed my waist before.

My waist irritated him, and then my hair. He wondered I did not dress it in a totally different manner : so to please him, I arranged it exactly after his description. Sad to say, I looked perfectly frightful ! I might just as well have simply braided my hair across my brow. I came under David's eye, feeling very nervous. He was quite put out at the look of me, and declared I had made a ridiculous caricature of his description. Ever after he let me dress my hair according to my own fashion, but he continued to find fault with the cut of all my dresses. At last I had not a single one which pleased him.

David is no actor. He clearly betrayed that some thought possessed him to which I was a stranger. I am not blind ; I wished I were ! for I had to see a change in him. It alarmed me. I could not understand it.

I asked David if he were in want of money, and found he was. I tried to think it must be money which alone preoccupied his mind. One moment I would be convinced it was ; the next, I would think it could not be. David was not easy to understand in money matters. The want of money seemed rather to annoy than to weigh upon him. He thought it "deuced hard lines !" that a fellow who could spend

a large fortune had not got it. So many fellows who had fortunes did not spend them. David wanted money in order to spend it—not for any other reason. He always talked as if there were something noble and generous in wishing for a large income, and some very remarkable sort of virtue in spending it when you had it; . . . or indeed, perhaps, when you had not. He often said with much fervour, “Thank Heaven, I am no miser!” Certainly he had no tendency that way.

I admired his open-handed nature, but it puzzled me to think where all the money was to come from. I tortured my brain with arithmetic, I turned and twisted figures after every possible fashion, yet I could not make a little over £2000 a-year go as far as three or four. Since our marriage, David had spent more than our income. Aunt Jane’s house and her expenses were not included in the calculation.

The oddest part of the matter was, that David spoke as if he had been miraculously economical.

I wished I had had more money to give him, for it put him in such good humour to dash about regardless of expense! At times I could not help wondering, rather nervously, how he would ever manage to lead a quiet, inglorious, cheap sort of life. I was very anxious he should have some occupation which would tie him to his home—some profession, too, by which he might make money. I told him so. In the main he agreed with me; but when we went fully into the matter, I discovered it was no easy thing to find a profession for

a man who only felt himself suited to a great career. The long, painfully obscure drudgery of most professions—of the bar, for instance—is unsuited to a born Prime Minister. David's taste is for political distinction. Should necessity ever persuade him to take up the bar, it will be rather as the future Prime Minister he will follow the profession, than as the predestined Lord Chancellor.

Whilst at college, David had rowed and ridden, and done little else, and yet he had been a first-class man in his own imagination, and in the imagination of the many friends who had clapped his speeches at the Union. He had never risked his reputation by going in for honours; so he had remained the "man who might have taken any degree he liked." Hitherto David had received no intellectual shock in life, and this may be called a misfortune where a man is not certainly born to £20,000 a-year.

When David was just beginning to think of really doing something some day, an event occurred which increased his natural distaste for inglorious drudgery. Lord Clinchfisted lost the elder of his two remaining sons. It was Lady Arabella first heard the news, and wrote it to David. I should say she wrote it off the very moment it reached her. There was no trace of reflection in her *naïve* letter. She expressed her real thoughts exactly as they rushed into her mind. Lady Arabella did not say, I trust the other child may (*D. V.*) be spared to its parents. On the contrary, she said, "I am *sure* the other baby is not going to live."

I hear this *de bon lien*. My dearest David, *what* an extraordinary thing it would be if *après tout* you really were to come in for the title and estates! Far be it from me to raise false hopes, but I have known such *very, very* extraordinary cases of the kind. Why, there is Hartmoor! Who ever dreamt *he* would have the property when his father was the *fifth* son, and he himself his father's *second* boy?"

Having heard one of the Clinchfisted babies was dead, I could imagine how Lady Arabella would jump to the conclusion the other must certainly die. She did not care for these two little Scotts. She had never seen them; but she did care a great deal for David, and she was delighted to think the title and fortune he had wellnigh grasped half his life were now coming within his reach again. Her letter was not a wise one. It would have been far better not to have mentioned the second baby at all. David was greatly excited, and, poor fellow! he seemed much ashamed of his awakened hopes. David did not want the other little boy to die. He was too kind-hearted for that. He said, "Sophy, it is deuced unpleasant to have your prospects hanging on a death! even if it be only the death of a mere infant. Deuced unpleasant! A fellow feels like a murderer when the idea strikes him. By Jove! I wish Aunt Arabella had not put the notion into my head. Upon my soul, I wish she had not! It is not an easy one to get rid of, I can tell you, when a fellow has been brought up to the idea all his life!"

I implored David to settle his mind, take up a pro-

fession, and thrust the thought aside, declaring I was quite certain little Lord Scott fully intended to live. I stood up for the child's constitution. I said that sort of boy, born late into a family, all of whom are not particularly anxious for a direct heir, will often have a luck of his own which will make him thrive better in the end than he might do were he the only hope of a race with every one longing for him to live. I told David I firmly believed in the contrariety of constitution which enables a delicate child of the kind to struggle through the measles, scarlatina, and whooping-cough, till it comes of age, and cuts off the entail.

But no one seemed to believe in the child's constitution except myself. Rigardy-Wrenstone called, though he was only in London for a day! He astounded me by saying he could not pass through town without coming to see me. His glorified condescension and politeness were such that David said to me afterwards, with a queer sort of smile, "Sophy, that poor infant must be dying." Even I thought the baby must have got the croup.

A most unexpected visit from Lady Tutterton, a few days later, confirmed me in this idea; for I did not think my Lady Tuttut would have troubled herself to call had the child been in good health. Lady Tutterton is one of those extraordinary women who make a caricature of worldliness. Her visit amused me intensely, but I cannot say it flattered me. On the contrary, it rather offended my pride. I had found it easy enough to forget Lady Tutterton's rudeness, but

I have not as yet forgotten, nor indeed forgiven, her sudden civility. *X see bit of paper some three weeks later so*

When once Easter was over, and people came up to town, a great many cards were left at our house; and David and I were overwhelmed with invitations to parties of all sorts. Many of these invitations were from people my husband had not even seen since Lord Clinchfisted's wedding-day. These people had merely forgotten David. They now remembered him.

People who had never known David before, wished to know him now. Mrs Clownton's friend, Mrs Stourton, insisted (Mrs Clownton told David) on being introduced to him. Mrs Stourton was constantly asking David to dine. She did not often ask me.

It was the first time I dined at Mrs Stourton's house that I met Louisa Clarcke again. We met her and Mrs Clownton and Mr Verrard.

I am a very unlucky person when I dine out. Having a heavy face and a heavy figure, the hostess invariably seems to think I should prefer to be taken down by the dullest man in the room. As the company assemble I look around, and I generally can pick out the uninteresting dully I am sure to get.

I had picked out my gentleman; I had sighed over the two long hours I should have to pass at table with him; he had been duly presented to me; I had entirely exhausted the weather; and still we did not go down to dinner. We were waiting for some people whom our host declared were not coming. Mr Stourton proposed we should have dinner at once; but our

hostess was more long-suffering, and felt perfectly certain her guests would arrive in two half-seconds. Mrs Stourton smiled, and said something to David I did not altogether hear. I only caught the words, "I am sure she will come, for you are to take her down, and she knows it! I told her so; and, Mr Scott, she thinks you the most agreeable man in London. Now, positively, she does!"

At length every one's patience was exhausted. Even my dully was moved to make a sententious remark on that virtue—punctuality.

Mr Stourton had actually rung for dinner before Mrs Augustus Clownton, Miss Clarke, and Mr Verrard were announced. Mrs Clownton made the merest apology for an excuse: "Now, really, London was getting so full, you know. Now, really, a person to be in time for anything, had to be in two places at the same moment! Now, positively, one really had. Such a bore!" Mrs Clownton "liked London when no one was there. Could always be in time for everything then!"

Our host had already marched away with Lady de Gguyllathe, his predestined dowager.

Mrs Stourton asked Mr Verrard to take down Mrs Clownton. I saw David offer his arm to Louisa Clarke. My dully and I followed David and Louisa. Louisa tripped lightly before us. I noticed her sylph-like figure, and her tiny waist encircled by a silver band.

At table I found myself seated almost opposite

David and Louisa. Fortunately for me, my dully was hungry, and during the first few courses he was happily engaged eating his dinner. He read the *menu* attentively, and kept a serious eye on the dishes he liked best. The dinner being very late, some of the dishes were spoilt, and these little disappointments occupied his mind. On the whole, I was lucky in my dully, since he could entertain himself. Most dullies can't !

I was in no humour to entertain any one. I could only seem to listen. I could not talk. I was bewildered by the great, the unexpected change I perceived in Louisa. The change in her was a shock to me. I was alarmed to see her so quiet, so improved in style and manners. I was startled to find no trace in her of the awfully-awful young person I had heard loudly bandying horsey jokes with Mr Fred Tankney, and "splitting" at the word "ex-actly !"

She was again what she used to be long ago,—what she was that night of my first ball, when David had gazed at her with a look I had forgotten for years, but remembered now. I thought Louisa even more beautiful than I had thought her then. I was terribly frightened by her beauty. It moved me strangely, because I saw that it moved David. Her parted lips hardly spoke, yet she seemed to be a sort of inspiration to him, making him forget his absent ways, and the silent thought which had of late absorbed his mind when he and I sat at home together.

David will ever look with penetrating eyes at those

to whom he speaks, so he kept looking at Louisa, and it was as he thus gazed that I heard his eloquence awake. The sound of his voice made me tremble ; it gave me a thrill of pain, it seemed to wound me, and I wondered if all the long time David had been away from me he had spoken to Louisa in this voice, and had gazed at her as he now was gazing. The thought that he had surely done so, agitated me. The glass which I was carrying to my lips fell from my trembling hand, and was broken on my plate.

When all eyes must have been turned with surprise upon me, I was only conscious of Louisa's glance. I saw her smile. She whispered a few words to David, which made him look at me and laugh. His laughter hurt me.

From time to time during dinner Louisa would look up at me. I imagined she always looked at me when David seemed most inspired by her beauty. Her glance confused me, because I would feel as if my secret thoughts, those thoughts of which I was ashamed, rushed into my face and could be read there.

It was anguish and shame to me to doubt David ; but as I sat watching him, all the jealous thoughts which had ever been thrust into my mind returned to me, and I remembered each one of them. I went back to them, and they were now a well-built house to dwell in. The foundations of jealous suspicion had been dug beforehand, and I had gone away from them and had forgotten them, yet secretly the house was build-

ing all the time, and when of a sudden I returned to the stones laid down long ago, there were solid walls of strong conviction for me to dwell between,—to be imprisoned by! For doubts are wide-open doors inviting escape, but intense conviction is barred and double-locked,—it is a jail; there is no hope in it.

The pain within me was a dulled, a speechless one, for the shock I had received quite stunned me. I could feel neither anger nor hatred—only despair. And there is no despair like that which perfect conviction brings to us—the perfect conviction that a sure and certain misfortune has closed in upon us and upon one whom we love better than ourself. The closing in of a once foreseen misery is more terrible, because more intensely certain, than any sudden accident of new and startling wretchedness: we believe the second time as we never could the first.

I rose from table when the other ladies rose, but I felt no joy in thinking Louisa had left her place by David's side.

When I went up-stairs, I was relieved to find nobody cared to speak to me. I could not have talked. Fancying it my duty to do so, I tried once, and spoke to the young lady who happened to be sitting silent next me. I got a very short answer from her, and was thankful to see Miss Gwendoline de Gguyllathe (pronounced Dellet) was particularly anxious not to make my acquaintance until she knew whom I might be. She seemed to take it for granted I could be no one, and appeared decidedly alarmed, as if I were

quite a dangerous neighbour. She soon changed her seat, and was cordially welcomed to a place on the sofa, between Mrs Augustus Clownton and Lady Dartford. It was Louisa's place she accepted, and she did so as if she were paying Louisa a compliment. I saw she was not quite sure as yet that Louisa was exactly in "her set." Young as she is, you can instantly tell when Miss Gwendoline de Gguyllathe entirely accepts a person as of her own set. In this respect she is her mother's typical daughter. Though Lady de Gguyllathe was dining with the Stourtons, and was now letting herself be talked to by Mrs Stourton, I could see at a glance that she considered her hostess only partly and not quite in her set; so the task of conversing with her was a hard one for Mrs Stourton—it was like trying to be very friendly with a hedgehog.

My silence was not noticed by any one, and I was glad of it. I had greatly feared Louisa might come and speak to me. I felt I could not command my voice to talk calmly with her about nothing, and I rejoiced to see her quite taken up listening to Miss de Gguyllathe, Mrs Clownton, and Lady Dartford. Although Louisa is by no means a talker, she looked longingly as if she would like to join in the conversation, but hardly dared. The Honourable Gwendoline de Gguyllathe, when she wishes it, has the knack of talking about her lady's-maid in a way which can make you feel her maid is in a different "set" from yours.

Miss de Gguyllathe complained of her maid to Mrs Clownton, who violently complained of hers. Lady

Dartford also complained of her maid. Then the three ladies made complaints, the one to the other, of their dressmakers. Lady Dartford and Miss de Gguyllathe complained seriously. It struck me that Mrs Clownton did not—she seemed proud of her dressmaker's charges. This surprised me, because I was aware she had very little money. I heard her say—"Cérise does what she likes with me! I told her thirty was too much for a mere tea-gown, but what can one do? Nobody fits like her, and one can't have one's things made anyhow, you know."

The next time the voices from the sofa caught my ear, the three ladies had passed (I cannot tell how) from thirty-guinea tea-gowns and fifty-guinea dresses to the church they were in the habit of patronising, decorating, and attending. They spoke of St Electra-the-Blessed as of a church decidedly in their "set." They declared every one went there now, and that nobody ever went anywhere else. Mrs Clownton remarked that she attended "early celebration" every morning of her life,—“and I always have to put on a good gown,” she said, “for early as it is, one meets so many people one knows. I invariably meet the Lerekers and the Warbattles. The Duchess of Wildfire used always to be there, till she went over to Rome; and I constantly see that Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart there,—that person, you know, who goes about with the Duchess, and sends out all her invitations.”

Lady Dartford asked how it happened that Miss de Gguyllathe's cousin, Evelyn Shartris, was never to be

seen now at the fashionable church. Miss de Gguyllathe answered that Evelyn's husband would insist on going to another church,—“ St Electra is not at all in his line ! Why, my dear Lady Dartford, though he is married to my cousin, you know he was really no one ! ”

Louisa at length ventured to say she did *so* enjoy the services at St Electra's ! She would not for the world go anywhere else, for she could not endure any other church ! And she exclaimed, as the other ladies had done, that everybody went there now, and that nobody really ever went anywhere else.

Miss de Gguyllathe did not snub Louisa's little effusion of fashionable sentiment, so Louisa looked pleased. She seemed quite satisfied with her success, and soon changed from her chair next Mrs Clownton's to one in front of the open door.

I saw her move, and I thought as David came upstairs, he would see her awaiting him and would go and sit beside her. My heart beat at the thought. It was one which, like a kindling fire, brought me all to life. My indignation tingled and burned in my cheek. I hated Louisa.

David stood in the doorway. At that same moment Louisa rose and came walking slowly across the room towards me. The rustle of her skirts, sweeping from one end of the carpet to the other, attracted general attention. Even Lady de Gguyllathe put up her eyeglass. Louisa's beauty is such that any woman who looks at her, looks again to criticise. Her graceful

figure is always set off to the best advantage. Indeed, her dress is so arranged as to give you the impression that she has studied the beauties of her own figure. I know Louisa likes to be looked at. She will hold back her head, arching her long, white throat. She has a smiling way of appearing half-conscious of admiration, and quite unconscious of the possibility of any other feeling. No eye confuses that large, soft one of hers.

Louisa came on smiling towards me, and took the empty seat next mine. All the chairs near me were empty, so she was not forced to take that one.

David had followed Louisa, walking just behind her train, and careful not to tread upon it. He looked amused at the length of it; not provoked, as, thought I, he would be with any dress of mine which lay trailing some three yards upon the ground.

When Louisa took the chair beside me, David seemed pleased, and said to me—"Louisa tells me you and she are very old friends, Sophy." They frequently called each other "Louisa" and "David" since the time they were engaged. These words were spoken kindly, as if David's instinctive sympathy told him I was ill at ease with him and Louisa, and he wished to make me feel at home. Had he spoken harshly, I could have answered him quickly enough with one of the commonplaces of society, but his voice moved me, because it was kind, and the words I fain would have spoken gave no sound upon my lips, but confused me by their silence.

"Sophy is not a bit changed," said Louisa, smiling, and turning her soft eyes upon me. I had only once seen any expression but that one in the blue vapour of her melting eyes. She spoke so that every one heard her, except the deaf Lady de Gguyllathe. The general attention Louisa had attracted was still fixed upon her. "Sophy never changes," she said; "she always had the same nose, and the same cheeks, and she always was stout, you know." This speech elicited an audible titter, and Lady de Gguyllathe insisted on being told what every one was laughing at. Lady de Gguyllathe is deaf, very deaf, but she is under the unalterable impression that she always hears perfectly well when people do not whisper, and she never forgives those who are rude enough to whisper in company. To avoid being considered a rude whisperer, Mrs Stourton was forced to repeat Louisa's little speech.

David heard the words repeated, and so did I. I smiled to pass them off, but I felt the painful contrast which they drew between Louisa's beauty and my own poor, ugly face—a face not made to touch the heart, and bring a dying love to life again. David looked from me to Louisa, then back to me. I trembled under his eye, for I thought that surely the sight of my reddening, jealous ugliness must quite kill his love, and even his pity.

But it was not so. David turned with an angry gesture from the girl whose beauty he admired, and bending down to me he whispered gently, ten-

derly, I thought, "Never mind her, Sophy,—never mind."

I answered with a sob of sudden, overwhelming joy. There was something in his voice which made me feel as if all love for me had not quite left him yet; and the surprise of a great joy unnerved me. Oh, the shame of those tears! the shame of them! They mortified David. They put him in a painful, ludicrous position. I felt they did, and I saw Louisa's smile of quiet triumph. David looked as if I had disgraced him.

Passionate jealousy, unknown to me, had choked my heart with bitter unwept tears, which now came, scalding my cheek, and making my joy feel to me like sorrow. Bowed down with shame, I said a quick good-night to Mrs Stourton, and left the room. I looked at no one.

David and I drove home in silence. I could not break the cold silence which grew between us.

I seemed conscious of it in my dreams, and I awoke to the separating silence next day. This chilling reticence was so unlike David's usual impulsive openness. I thought I had never before known him shun any subject, and then I remembered how he had always avoided mentioning Louisa's name to me, even in his letters. This recollection added a vague, uneasy terror to my disquieting jealousy.

I made a painful effort to approach last night's humiliating scene. I would fain have tried to make David understand and forgive, if not pity, my emotion,

but he snubbed me irritably, and said, "Let the matter drop, Sophy; I don't want to hear any more about it; only the next time you make a fool of yourself, don't make a fool of me too."

David left the house shortly after, saying he would lunch at his club, and would not be back till evening.

It was the truth in his bitter words which stung me. They were very bitter words for David to have spoken. But it was terribly true that I had made a fool of myself, and the worst kind of fool: the tearful woman, the hysterical jealous wife, was of all fools the one I had hitherto had the most contempt for. I felt lowered to the level of Aunt Jane. The thought that it was I who had made David a ridiculous laughing-stock to such people as the Stourtons and De Gguyllathes, crushed all the pride within me, till it seemed to bleed with pain. I well knew the Stourtons and De Gguyllathes were just the people to spread a ludicrous story at David's and my expense, and I felt how easy it would be for them to make their tale unutterably silly. I realised they would say my sudden burst of passionate emotion was entirely caused by Louisa's speech. "She always had exactly the same nose, and the same cheeks, and she always was stout, you know." I could have died of angry shame to think my tears should be ascribed to stupid words like these. The bitterness of the humiliation was more than I could bear.

But the cruellest pang of all lay in knowing—for I did know it—that I had turned David back again to Louisa, just when an impulse of noble generosity had

moved him with a sort of love towards me. The thought that I had lost that love, and driven it farther from me than before, filled me with a self-reproaching torment, which would have maddened me had I not found relief in bitter hatred. The longing disappointment, the indignant, remorseful passion which confused and cruelly distracted me, grew into one strong, active hatred. I felt I had a right to hate Louisa. I felt it was she, she alone, who had estranged David from me, —who had blighted the joy of my life, and from mere vanity! spiteful, contemptible vanity! I hated her cold-blooded, smiling love of personal admiration. I hardly blamed David; I blamed her, so I hated her with the hatred I might have given to both. I remembered every look she had cast at David in my presence, and I saw her as she must have looked over and over again when I was far away and trusted her. Hatred swallowed up every other torment within me. It became a consolation to me, and I found real satisfaction in its passionate intensity.

I was alone all day.

David returned to a very late dinner. I had waited for him with a thousand eager words upon my lips, but when he did come I was speechless, because he was cold to me. His chilling, silent, hurtful manner gave me exquisite pain. At first it benumbed me; then my heart grew full to overflowing.

There was almost complete silence between us at dinner. Afterwards, we sat quite silent in the drawing-room, until David suddenly startled me by speak-

ing. He said to me crossly, "Surely, Sophy, you don't intend to go to the Stourtons' in that gown?"

"The Stourtons'?" I exclaimed, greatly astonished; "we are not going there. You forget, David; we refused. You said it was too much of a good thing to go there two nights running. Those were your own words. And," I added, with marked emphasis, "I agreed with them."

"I saw Mrs Stourton to-day, and promised I would go," said David, rising hastily. Though he did not say so, I seemed to hear in his voice that he had also met Louisa, and I felt sure it was she who had made him promise to go. I inquired, "Did they ask me too?"

"They said nothing about you," replied David, carelessly; "but no doubt they meant you to go if you liked it."

"When Louisa invited you to-day, and begged you, and pressed you to come," said I, trembling all over, "she did not mean me to go with you, David; you know she did not."

"I said Mrs Stourton asked me," cried David, with growing passion; "I never mentioned Louisa's name."

"No, no!" I answered, bitterly; "you did not. But you met her all the same. You did, David, you did!"

"I did!" he said. His eyes flashed; his anger would have silenced me at any other time.

"You mean to meet again, David," I said; "you have settled it together, David,—you will meet her to-night; you are going to the Stourtons' to meet her."

"I will meet her!" said David, in a voice I had

never heard before ; “ I will meet her when I like. What harm is there in meeting her ? I will go to the Stourtons’ on purpose to meet her.”

“ Then I won’t go ! ” said I, rising ; “ I won’t go with you, David ! I cannot bear to see her look at you.”

“ Well, stay at home,” said he, roughly ; “ when a woman means to make a fool of herself, she had far better stay at home.”

8 * I went up very near to my husband, and laid my hand imploringly upon his arm,—“ Oh, Davie, Davie, do not be cruel to me ! I cannot bear to see her look at you ; ~~Davie~~ I cannot bear it ! I can’t bear it, Davie ! ” He shook off my hand, and left the room. He went away, and did not leave me one kind word, no, not one, to feed upon till he came back again.

I had thought I could not bear the sight of Louisa. Like a coward, I had let David go without me rather than see her meet him ; yet now that I was alone, I saw no one but her. The vision of her beauty was before me. I hid my eyes, and only seemed to increase the power of my sight. My head was buried in my hands, yet I saw more vividly than my open eyes staring with all their might could have seen. The seeing mind is a fearful torment ; you cannot turn away its gaze, or blind its sight, or find it rest and peace in darkness. There is no darkness for the mind which sees ! Louisa stood before me. Every trifling detail of her dress and figure was clearly visible to me. I even saw her hair arranged as David had in vain wished me to wear mine. These petty details remind-

ing me each one of some cross word of David's, of some pang of disappointment, irritated me painfully. I felt each beauty in Louisa as a cruel failure in myself.

Ever since I was sixteen, I had known I was ugly, but I had often forgotten it. On the whole, with a rare exception here and there, I had really troubled my head very little about my appearance, considering what that appearance is. But now that I found beauty was an inspiration to David, carrying him out of himself, changing him entirely,—now that I found loveliness of face and form was everything to him, and that by its side my whole heart's love, the worship of my soul, was nothing, only a bore,—I longed with passionate desire for the one gift which can bring joy to a woman, because it brings her love. This useless craving embittered me. I thought God had been cruel and unjust towards me: He had given me the nature which requires much love, and the face which kills it. Had He not been more cruel to me in this than to the lowest animal? for what creature is there, however vile, who poisons its own food itself?

The more I dwelt upon my own hopeless ugliness, the more clearly did I see Louisa's beauty, and feel and understand its power. I saw her and David meet. I saw no one else, but they two alone. Her hand met David's, and lingered in his. I saw her eyes of melted blue upturned, softly beseeching . . . beseeching David for his love, thought I, and trembled. I had seen that look last night; it had moved David, so I could not forget it. I thought it moved him now, as

then. I seemed to feel it move him. I seemed to feel those eyes beseech him to sudden passion.

My heart beat fast, and I heard David speak in that voice which fills me, when I even think I hear it, with joy or pain. It is a voice to move a woman, and make her yield her soul, and at its bidding go to heaven or to hell.

I heard—I could have sworn I heard—David speak words of madness. Terror seized me, for I saw Louisa slowly, and with beseeching glance, raise her ever-smiling face, her cherry lips to his. With sudden inspiration he bent towards her, and I thought he left a burning kiss of wicked joy upon her lips, to sear them and brand them with infamy for life. For one short moment this infamy of hers, this stain upon her beauty, thrilled me with delicious pleasure. . . . And then I awoke to my own shame, not to hers! to my own vile shame—my own misery and remorse.

I was frightened at the wickedness of my own mind. I was terrified by its horrid thoughts, unlike any other thoughts which had ever come to me before in all my life. It was as if the devil, in the frenzy of my jealousy, had snatched my mind from me unawares, and then had given it back to me defiled.

The twilight of a long day had merged into night. I preferred to sit on in the darkness; I could bear remorseful, shame-reddening thoughts better in darkness than in the glare of light. I grieved for the injustice I had done David. I did not care enough about Louisa to think of her at all. I only thought

of David, to whom I once had said, as if I were pledging him my word, "No mean thought must ever come to you or me." I asked myself if David had ever thought of me as I of him, could I forgive him? And I knew I could not.

When carried too far by passion, as if by a greater wave beyond the surf of smaller ones, we are cast above the turmoil of the sea. We look unmoved upon the whirling current, which has no more power to drag us on. The man who kills, forgets the passion in the deed he has done: the stab he gave has carried him beyond his rage; the current of his anger has passed on, and he is cast in contemplation high above it.

I forgot all else in the wrong with which my vile thoughts had dishonoured David. I loved him more than I could have done had I never been unjust towards him.

And so it came to pass when he and I met again next day that I was kind, very kind, and loving to him. I saw he was surprised; from his manner I am sure he expected me to be angry, and not kind. He did not know I had shamefully wronged him; he did not know I had thought more vilely of him than his worst enemy could think. Oh, David, David!

My heart yearned towards him. I said to him, "Davie, Davie, is there anything on earth I could do for you?" He only stared at me. I puzzled him. That was all! yet not even that for long. I soon became aware I was not a mystery worth unravelling; I was not worth the trouble of it!

CHAPTER XII.

THE great want in life is some one to love us, and whom we may love with unrestrained warmth. I have never had a brother, but I have observed the passionate love of the sister too often becomes the wife's bitter jealousy, and therefore is a delusion. There is a dearth of satisfying love on earth. Oh, that longing to be loved, and that necessity to love—are they not the curse of woman? The true curse of Eve, I think, because what curse could be more terrible to half the women in this world than that sad need of satisfying human affection? That incurable desire!

If only we could live careless of human love, how calm and happy we should be! But the yearning of the daughter, the sister, the wife, the mother, is born into this world with most of us, like a cruel disease. The parents die; the brother, if there be one, perhaps cares not for the sister's love; so then come the other two desires to eat up the heart, yet in devouring may be to find no satisfaction, only endless hunger. Starved or unrequited love will grow into gnawing pain, but

will not die : so that it be strong enough to bear pain, and only weak love cannot suffer, it would seem as if it could not die ! The curse lives on.

When I came to feel, to know, to be certain that I knew David did not really care for me, my love for him could not die. It lived on, a yearning, unsatisfied desire within me—a desire which could find no rest. I could not kill it. David's presence moved me ; his look, his voice disturbed my very soul. When he was away from me, I never forgot his absence. It grieved me to think ill of him. I excused him in my thoughts, until I persuaded myself there could be no real harm in him, but only in Louisa : it was she I blamed, and she I hated.

Ever since the night I had sillily betrayed my emotion at the Stourtons', Louisa seemed to take a fresh delight in flirting with David. She treated my unfortunate outburst of feeling as a remarkably good joke—a standard joke. She would come up to me, leaning on David's arm, and would ask me if she might be allowed to go down to supper with him. "I thought you might object, Sophy, and then you see one could not tell what might happen ! The consequences might be touching !"

And she would laugh, and David would laugh too. She seemed to have quite persuaded him I was a ridiculous sort of dowdy, old-fashioned, jealous wife, who would like to tie him up in a bag and keep him there, and let him speak to no one, and have no fun whatever. She had made David think it was great fun for

her to flirt with him, and the most perfectly natural, harmless, right sort of fun: married people tied to each other in society were musty goody-bodies not fit for fashionable life!

David would go off laughing with Louisa, and I would not see him again the whole evening. The joke was one he liked: it amused him,—it put him in good humour. He had slipped into the habit of treating me, both in society and at home, with a sort of friendly indifference. This manner of his I knew was not unkind, yet it felt to me like cruelty.

But I had learned almost to conceal my feelings, because to show them would be to tease David, and worse, to make him despise me. I was resolved he never should have reason to be ashamed of me again. I was firmly, intensely determined he should be forced to respect me for my self-command, and that he should see I was no mere fool given up to hysterical jealousy and haggling reproach. Contempt, David's contempt, was a pain I could not bear.

I did not again refuse to go to any party with David. I had no wish to spend long evenings alone with my own thoughts; I dreaded them, for how could I tell where they might lead me? So I went into society willingly enough, though I felt but little interest in any one I saw except in David and Louisa.

The people I met took perhaps more interest in me than I in them. They were mostly very civil to me—remarkably so, in fact. Even Lady de Gguyllathe and Miss Gwendoline de Gguyllathe came sailing from one

side of a room to the other, on purpose, they said, to have the pleasure of being introduced to me. I had carefully kept away from them; they were just the sort of ladies stuck all over by nature with crooked pins, whom you instinctively avoid. Their gracious affability surprised me. Miss de Ggyullathe was not a bit afraid of me; indeed she seemed entirely to have forgotten the alarm with which I had inspired her at the Stourtons'.

I could not understand these ladies in the least, till I happened to overhear the following little dialogue between the dowager and an elderly friend. Then I thought I understood them better.

"Pray, my dear Lady de Ggyullathe, who is that shortish lady in the blue dress you were talking to just now?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Who is the lady in the blue dress you were talking to just now?"

"I do not quite catch what you are saying, Lady Vellum."

"Who—is—the—person—in the—blue—dress" (louder and louder)—"you—were—talking to—just—now?"

"Oh! my dear Lady Vellum, you need not speak so loud. I am not deaf."

Lady Vellum having duly apologised, Lady de Ggyullathe told her the lady in the blue dress was Mrs David Scott.

"Quite a nice person, I can assure you! Why, my

dear Lady Vellum, if anything should happen to the Clinchfisted's wretchedly delicate little boy, Mr David Scott would be heir to the earldom, and he would come in for all the estates as well—they are entailed upon him. I know this for a fact." Lady Vellum asked to be introduced to me.

The De Gguyllathes were not the only ladies who thought David and me "quite nice people." I often overheard the remark, "Quite nice people, I do assure you!" But it was invariably followed by David's prospects, "if anything should happen"—that was the way every one expressed the idea,—“if anything should happen” to the Clinchfisted baby. I never heard any one say I was good, or kind, or agreeable, or clever, so my head was not turned by suddenly becoming undoubtedly “a nice person.” Besides, I not unfrequently found myself crushed into a doorway, or a corner, or behind an immovable chair, amidst the remarks of people who knew David, but to whom my appearance was not so well known. David had gone out a great deal into society a few years ago, at a time when *something had happened* to every direct heir in the Clinchfisted family, and the old Earl was not married to a young wife,—so people remembered David again.

The remarks I would be jammed amongst were not always very pleasant, or flattering, or comforting for me to hear, such as, “That poor Mr David Scott! They tell me he is married to such an awfully plain woman;” “Poor man! what possessed him to marry her?”

"Money, my dear, money! and I am told he has not even got what he expected."

I would overhear quite lengthy conversations of this sort: "How that prettyish girl who goes about with that fast Mrs Clownton does flirt with that Mr David Scott!" "Never saw anything like it!" "They tell me all the gentlemen are wild about her." "Well, I am sure I don't see much to admire in her!—but then she is a regular gentleman's beauty." "Yes, indeed—a born flirt! However, she has rather good eyes." "And she knows it!" "They say she was in love with Mr Scott some years ago, and accepted him, and then threw him over, thinking she was going to make a better match; but I am told she did not like his marrying at all, and thought he ought to have gone on languishing *pour ses beaux yeux*. They say she still continues writing to him, and any one can see she has not stopped flirting with him." "I hear he is married to such a plain woman!" "Ah, poor man! you see when he married he had no prospects—positively none!" "Indeed? why I always thought if anything should happen . . ." "I know!—quite so! but there seemed no chance of such luck then." "What a pity, poor man!—had he only waited, he might have married any one!" "They say his wife is devoted to him." "Then he is to be pitied!—for she is sure to be fearfully jealous of him, and I suppose he does not care a straw for her." "How could he? poor man!"

Poor man!—always poor man! never poor woman!

No word of pity for me ever reached my ear. It seemed to be taken for granted, as an understood certainty, that I could not have the feelings of other women because I had no beauty. Yet not a few of the ladies who said *poor man!* were plain enough themselves; so I was led to think many a lady must fancy herself better looking than she is. They one and all spoke of me as right served,—indeed, as of a fool right served. “They say she was violently in love with him.” “And did she think he was in love with her?” “Do you know, they actually say she did!” “How utterly ridiculous! What a perfect idiot she must be!” “Well, at any rate, she must now know what it is to be adored!” “And she deserves it!” The lady who made this last remark, I must allow, was a very attractive-looking young creature.

There were other ladies who spoke of me as if I could even be considered lucky. “Mr Scott is just amusing himself—nothing more! I declare she is a very fortunate woman; for though he does not care for her—how could he?—he will never do anything outrageous. Indeed, all things considered, he is really the pink of propriety! for who could expect him to make love to his own wife? I hear she is a perfect fright!”

The unanimity of the opinion—she is in love with him, but he does not care for her; how could he?—terrified me. I saw no comfort anywhere. Long ago at Mineham, when Louisa was flirting with Mr Fred Tankney, I had most pitied David for having a rival

so inferior to himself. But now that my own rival was superior to me in the one attraction—in the one virtue, I might call it!—of which alone the world seems to take account in women, it was her superiority which most enraged me. I had artistic sense enough myself to feel the power of her beauty. When I looked at her, I hated her; yet I, even I, could understand why David liked to gaze upon her face and form.

I tried to keep David away from the houses where he was certain to meet Louisa. I told him we had got into a fast set, and that I liked neither it nor Mrs Stourton. David agreed with me; yet he would go to the Stourtons' all the same. He would go wherever he thought he should meet Mrs Clownton and Louisa, for Louisa was always with Mrs Clownton: she told David her own mother was not going out at present, as her father was ill. David said Mrs Clownton was distantly related to Sir Henry Clarke, so it was quite the right thing for her to take out Louisa.

Mrs Stourton seemed to me to entertain Mrs Clownton's friends, and not her own. David himself only knew Mrs Stourton through Mrs Clownton. David told me Mrs Clownton issued Mrs Stourton's invitations, and sent them about with her own card. Mrs Stourton has a very big, handsomely furnished house, and Mrs Clownton has a very, very small one.

All the smart people (as they are called) went to these Clownton-Stourton entertainments, and I could not make out why, for they were almost rude to Mrs

Stourton, and they, none of them, seemed to like Mrs Clownton. I never heard any one say a good word for her; but they all said, "She goes everywhere!" There seemed to be some hidden virtue in *going everywhere*, which covered a multitude of sins.

Lady de Gguyllathe said to me: "Mrs Augustus Clownton is decidedly a queer person. She leaves her husband in the country, and declares the London season does not agree with him, so she takes that Mr Verrard about with her wherever she goes, and tells people he is intended for that Miss Clarcke, but . . . but, my dear, she need not imagine any one believes her. Really these fast ladies are shocking! Yet what can you do? You meet Mrs Clownton everywhere. I can assure you, she goes everywhere!"

Shortly afterwards I witnessed very cordial greetings between the Dowager Lady de Gguyllathe and the Hon^{ble}. Mrs Augustus Clownton. Her ladyship was even graciously pleased to acknowledge the existence of that Mr Verrard and of that "Miss Clarcke, who goes about everywhere with that Mrs Clownton." Fanny was there, too, that night, but Lady de Gguyllathe did not appear to recognise her as a person who *went everywhere*.

Fanny herself declared she went nowhere, positively nowhere! She was delighted to see me, "because," said she, "I know no one! positively no one! I am here entirely by accident to-night. Mamma thinks Louisa quite a beauty, and only cares for her to go out. Julia and I positively go nowhere! Mamma

does not care to go out herself, for when she goes, papa will go too, and papa won't let her do what she likes, and he won't let her run after Mr Verrard; besides, papa is so cross! It is awfully hard lines! He won't ask any one to the house, and he says all the men we know are awfully fast. He won't even ask that poor inoffensive Sir Harry Hardup, though I am sure he is a perfectly harmless little creature, only awfully amusing!"

Fanny was very outspoken by nature. She was just the same girl I had met at Mineham: she had not changed, like Louisa. There was a touch of Manyfields, and a good deal of the *awfully-awful*, about her still. "Papa is so cross! so awfully cross!" she repeated; "and he says mamma runs after people, and he won't let her ask Jim Verrard to dine, and he was awfully angry when he accidentally discovered Mrs Clownton and Jim Verrard had been staying with us in Scotland the time mamma took papa up to town to consult the doctors. Mamma says papa is ill, but Julia and I don't think he is, only mamma persuades him not to go out, and she makes him take quinine pills, and go to bed early, and she stays at home herself, so we stay too, but she sends Louisa everywhere with Mrs Clownton, on purpose, we know, to meet Jim Verrard. Mamma is mad for Louisa to meet him. She thinks him an awfully good match!" Fanny dropped her voice: "Mamma is bent on the match, Sophy, but I don't think she will ever catch him, and Julia does not think so either." Fanny dropped her

voice still lower: "Mrs Clownton likes to keep Jim Verrard dangling after herself. She always has a man of some kind dangling after her, and she does not mean to change Jim Verrard just yet, because he gives her such beautiful presents, and he is awfully good-looking. I know she does not want to change him yet! Mrs Clownton is awful fun, Sophy, awful! but very odd, awfully odd! I tell mamma she is awfully queer, but mamma won't believe me. You see mamma does not wish to believe me, Sophy, because she wants to send Louisa about with Mrs Clownton, for Mrs Clownton tells mamma she never lets Louisa speak to any unmarried man except Jim Verrard, and that is quite true, only . . ."—Fanny looked hard at me—"only . . . she does not tell mamma how well Louisa can flirt with a married one."

"By-the-by, Fanny," said I, as if I had not heard her last remark—"by-the-by, that very fast-looking lady there with all those diamonds and that extremely low dress, is she really the Duchess of Wildfire? I heard some one say she is. I mean, Fanny, that particular Duchess of Wildfire who is separated from her husband? the one who has just gone over from the extreme High Church to Rome? the one who used to be so mad about the Christian Cossack?"

Fanny did not answer my question, but kept looking at me; and she laughed, and exclaimed, "You are quite too more than clever, Sophy, quite too more! But I am not going to let you turn the conversation like that! Don't be so awfully blushy and silly!

You know Louisa is flirting outrageously with that foolish husband of yours—now you know she is, Sophy! and you ought to prevent it. You know everything and see everything, and there is no good in pretending you don't."

It would have been dignified for me to walk away in silence; but I am naturally inquisitive, and I thought, "Perhaps Fanny has something to say I have not heard before;" so I stayed to hear. I tried not to betray the slightest emotion, and answered with a kind of cold loftiness: "It is no harm for David to speak to Louisa, or for Louisa to speak to him. They are old friends."

"No harm! no harm!" cried Fanny; "that is what every one says! but Sophy, Sophy, take care! she will estrange your husband. She is quite clever enough for that, and that is all she wants to do." And dropping her voice to a whisper, which was impressive because she generally spoke loudly, she said: "People who flirt with other people's husbands may have awfully large eyes, and be awfully pretty, and lisp like babies, and all that sort of thing, but they know quite well what they are doing. They know awfully well they are amusing themselves and teasing other people, especially if they are angry with them! and Louisa is awfully angry with you, Sophy, awfully! for she is quite sure David Scott is going to come in for the title and fortune, and she thinks you had no right to make such a good match, and, perhaps, if you were not married to David Scott now, she might marry him

herself, because she knows Jim Verrard does not mean to propose, and she never really cared for Fred Tankney. Never! He was just put into her head, and she thought him a good catch!"

In my heart I believed all this of Louisa, but I instinctively exclaimed, I cannot tell why, "Nonsense, Fanny! nonsense!" as if I should like roughly to thrust the subject aside.

"You are exactly like everybody else, Sophy!" cried Fanny, in the voice and with the piqued manner of a person who is in the habit of feeling injured, and has just been injured again, and who really cannot stand this repeated injustice any longer. "You are exactly like everybody else! No one believes anything of Louisa! No one believes she is clever enough to be angry and spiteful! Everybody thinks her awfully amiable! awfully!—much more amiable than Julia or me; and they don't think her a bit fast now. Every one says she is quite changed, but she is not! She is just twice as fast as we are, and we know it, only hers is a deep-down, quiet sort of die-away fastness. The fast girls to be afraid of are not the awfully slangy ones!"

I interrupted Fanny's indignation to say, "Really, my dear Fanny, I had no idea of comparing . . ."

"But you think it all the same!" she cried; "every one thinks it! because Louisa has awfully big, swimmy sort of eyes, and can't talk, and never reads books, everybody thinks she is not one bit

clever or spiteful, only awfully innocent; but Julia and I know she is very clever in her own way,—quite clever enough to flirt shockingly, and to do exactly what she wants; and if people once admire her, she is awfully jealous if they admire any one else, and poor Julia and I know she is not one bit kind about those sort of things,—not one bit!”

Fanny looked agitated, and got up and left me brusquely. I did not see her again that evening; indeed, I have not seen her since. Louisa has since preferred to go out alone with Mrs Clownton.

Mrs Clownton continued to go *everywhere* every day of her life, until suddenly the theatrical passion took possession of her again; and then she went nowhere! positively nowhere! for ten whole days.

During those ten days of everlasting rehearsal, I hardly saw David. Mrs Clownton “could not get on without him. He is perfection, my dear Mrs Scott, positive perfection! You really must come to our grand night; now, you really must! I insist upon it! but till then, take the advice of one who has some little practical experience of stage management, and keep away! keep away from us, my dear Mrs Scott, keep away! Avoid us like poison! I never admit people to a rehearsal—it spoils the rehearsal for us, and the play for them. We should disgust you, my dear Mrs Scott, positively disgust you! Now, I know we should!” and she again repeated, “Take my advice, and keep away from us, my dear

Mrs Scott, keep away!" This repetition was quite unnecessary. I could not possibly have done anything else but keep away from her house, when she refused, "positively refused," to invite me inside her doors.

If she had kept David rehearsing all day long, and had not even let him come home to dinner, Mrs Clownton would send me a very particular message, bidding me on no account forget I was engaged to her for the "grand night," and she would tell David to say she never could or would forgive me if I accepted any other engagement for that evening.

When at last the great day had come, that very afternoon, the very afternoon of her "grand night," Mrs Clownton wrote to me in "despair, in positive, perfect despair!" saying she was scandalised and horrified, and really did not know how to tell me, but she had just, "only just" discovered that she had done *the* most shocking thing, in fact, *the* most dreadful thing in the whole world which she possibly could do—she had asked more people than her wretched, tiny, little mousehole of a room could under *any* circumstances be made to hold! "My dear Mrs Scott, *every one* insists on coming, and so *few* people are good-natured! I have written to every creature I *dare* put off." She declared she would not think of writing to me, only I was so *very* good-natured, and not a bit huffy! so utterly unlike other people! She said, moreover, that she

was *perfectly* certain I would understand *everything*! and *forgive* her, and even *pity* her!

This was a mistake, for I did not understand her, and I certainly did not pity her, neither did I quite forgive her. I had an uneasy suspicion that her letter was all a pretence, and that for some reason or other she did not want me to see her and Mr Verrard, and David and Louisa, acting proposals together.

David was not by when I received Mrs Clownton's letter. I did not get it until five o'clock in the afternoon, and David had gone off immediately after luncheon to rehearse his part once more, and to dine early with the other amateur actors and actresses.

While I sat at home by myself that evening, the idea struck me, could David have had any part in Mrs Clownton's letter? could he, my own husband, have wished me to be kept away? The idea was like a cruel stab to me. I loved David too well not to thrust the thought aside; but in passing, it had left a wound. I remembered, and could not forget it.

"David," said I next day, when we two were together once more—"David . . ." I could not look him in the face, for shame had seized me. Yet I would ask the question I was ashamed to ask. "David," I said, in a low, imploring voice—"David, did you see Mrs Clownton's letter?"

I got no answer. In painful, nervous dread, I looked at him, and saw he had not even heard me! He sat with a hand in each pocket, and his legs stretched out, the very picture of boredom. I watched him. He hardly seemed aware of my presence. He was whistling absently. His careless, abstracted air annoyed me. "David," I exclaimed, rather sharply; "did you see Mrs Clownton's letter yesterday?"

David yawned. "What letter?" he asked, lazily, as if he took no interest in the matter. He yawned a second time. He seemed dead tired after last night's excitement.

"What letter, David?" I repeated; "why, Mrs Clownton's letter. The letter saying she had no room for me."

"No room where?" asked David, gaping again.

"Where? where? Oh, David, how can you ask? You know I was not at Mrs Clownton's party last night. You know I was not. You know she pretended there was no room for me."

David sat straight upright. A look of unfeigned surprise crossed his face. "Why, Sophy," said he, "I thought you were one of my audience,—I made sure you were. By Jove! is it possible you never came after all?" And laughing, as if much amused, he added, "And there was I, so careful to act like the discreet married man whose wife was looking at him! By rights, I ought to have embraced the

heroine in the last act! upon my soul, I ought! And I did not! I did not half do my dramatic lover's part! Not half! I left out no end of little points!"

Never, never till I die shall I forget the dull thud of disappointment I felt at these careless words. I thought I should have preferred, a hundred times preferred, any deceit, any trick, which showed my husband had at least been thinking of me, to this oblivion. He had not even noticed my absence! Yet, when he was away from me, I always missed him. Where many were present, my eyes searched first for him, and I felt alone until I found him.

I was not angry with David—there is quickening life, there is almost hope in anger. In disappointment there is no hope. This cold dulness stayed the flow of my warm blood, and chilled me to the heart.

David did not even perceive his words had hurt me. There was a time when I had found him the most sympathetic of men—the only human being in this cold world who seemed to divine my thoughts and feel with me; and where was this instinct of kind sympathy now? Was it dead and gone for ever? or was David still a sympathetic man, but in sympathy with the wrong woman? We sat in the same room together, and yet were far apart. It was as if a gulf had opened between us, and he lived at one side and I alone at the other.

He was moodily absent, engrossed in thoughts he would not speak.

From time to time he would shake off the absent fit with visible effort, and then he would want to be amused, and ask me why I was so dull. I would try to talk to him, but I seemed to have nothing to say, and he did not help me. My attempts at conversation fell heavily; they were a failure. I bored David. Had he cared to talk himself, as of old, his wit might have inspired me. But no subject moved him now. He seemed to have forgotten the ambition of his earlier days, and I saw this indifference with pain. I had so loved to hear his eloquence, and to see him fired by enthusiasm for great things! Now he preferred to sit silent.

I wondered he cared to stay at home, as he found me dull, and himself dull, too; but a change had come over him since Mrs Clownton's theatricals. He refused to go anywhere, and said he was sick of society. He was angry with me because I reminded him of an invitation he had accepted to the Stourtons', and declared he would not go to their house, as he would certainly meet "that odious Mrs Clownton there."

Something had certainly happened on Mrs Clownton's "grand night," but what it was I could not discover. When I asked David more particularly about the theatricals, he said he hated to be cross-

questioned—"Every fellow hates it, Sophy! It is the one habit a man can't endure in his wife."

I was silenced. David had spoken crossly, and I saw he thought so himself; but he only appeared the more irritated by the consciousness of his own harshness. David had lost the art of repenting agreeably.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOME eight or nine days after the theatricals, David threw off his moody fit. The coolness between him and Mrs Clownton suddenly ceased. He began to go out again, and became quite lively, even talkative. "By-the-by, Sophy," he said to me, "I do not think I ever told you whom I met at Mrs Clownton's the night of our theatricals. I have intended telling you a hundred times since, and, by Jove! I have always forgotten it! I say, Sophy, you will never guess who she was, so I will just tell you—I met your admirable Catherine! and the admirable Catherine was frightfully civil to me, and would not let me cut her. She managed to shake hands with me before I realised who she was,—upon my soul, she did! and no wonder I did not know her!" David laughed heartily. "She was got up in great style," he cried; "low neck, and all that sort of thing! None of the pious dowdy about her, I can tell you! She praised up our acting, and was no more scandalised by the theatricals than if she had never lived under the same roof as your Aunt Jane."

"Oh, David!" I said, a little reproachfully, "how could you forget to tell me you had met her?"

"Went clean out of my head! clean out of my head!" he exclaimed.

"Will she always be at Mrs Clownton's and at the Stourtons' when we go there?" I asked, eagerly. I thought with horror of her eye turning from David and Louisa to look cruelly upon me. I could feel that eye penetrating my secret grief, and hear that rasping voice publishing my sad misfortune to the world. "I shall hate to meet her, David," said I; "how does Mrs Clownton come to know her?"

"I am not sure she does know her, Sophy," he answered; "it was the Duchess of Wildfire brought her that night. She goes everywhere with the duchess, even to chapel, I am told. Do you know, Sophy, all the world declares your admirable Catherine has turned Roman Catholic." For an instant I felt the surprise any piece of news, even expected news, excites before we have time to realise it; but a moment's reflection was enough. I said, "David, I am not really surprised. Under the circumstances, this was the admirable Catherine's natural end. The monsignors will be beautifully civil to her, and a great many grand ladies will instantly take her up. She will suit them all to perfection!"

"Write and tell your Aunt Jane!" exclaimed David; "write and tell her the news, Sophy! By Jove! what a fuss there will be! How she and Aunt Arabella will both talk and talk together!"

As for your Aunt Jane, she will talk on the subject unceasingly for the next two years!" David laughed heartily—he was in high good humour again.

I lost no time in writing to Aunt Jane. I was glad to have some exciting news to tell her,—delighted to be able to give her and Lady Arabella something shocking and unexpected to talk about. Of late I had seen unmistakable signs that my aunts were growing tired of each other's spiritual refreshment, and I feared they had intermarried the whole world into hopeless confusion.

We had more than arrived at the time of year when Lady Arabella came up to town and gave her annual charity concert. She had delayed taking a house later than usual this year, and I was sure she had done so for David's sake, because she knew Aunt Jane would tease David, and she feared he might be driven away from me again. I was deeply grateful to dear Lady Arabella for her tact and kindness; and I only hoped she would keep Aunt Jane away a little longer.

I trembled at the mere thought of Aunt Jane's arrival. Even supposing she would consent to sleep in her own damp house, I knew she would live in mine. I had a horror of her appearing on the scene amidst Mrs Clownton and Mr Verrard, and Louisa and David. I did not know what idea might not strike her. I only knew she would say exactly what she ought not to, and drive David mad!

I also thought if Aunt Jane could stay away just a little longer, that Mrs Clownton might perhaps have

grown tired of our acquaintance. I knew she was a lady who took up people and places by fits and starts; so if she took you up to-day, you had a good chance of being dropped to-morrow. She had the reputation of constantly changing everybody, even her gentleman-in-waiting. I had heard Lady de Gguyllathe say that Mrs Clownton had kept Mr Verrard longer in her service "than any other footman." This was strange, for a less assiduous attendant I never saw in my life. He was really too lazy to attend on any one. His flirtation (if it could be called such) was passive, not active; he let Mrs Clownton flirt with him, that was all! He let her hint she would like a bracelet or a dress, and he gave it to her. Under other circumstances, it was not unlikely he would have allowed Louisa Clarke to do the same. I could understand how Lady Clarke, believing in Mrs Clownton's obligations towards herself, should think Mr Verrard must be a certain "catch."

Mrs Clownton was slipping into the habit of coming constantly at odd hours to my house: she would say, "My dear Mrs Scott, you see I come quite without ceremony." She invariably brought Louisa Clarke and Mr Verrard. They also came quite without ceremony, and entirely without apology.

I much disliked Mr Verrard coming continually to my house with Mrs Clownton, but so accustomed was he to be taken everywhere by this lady that he never perceived my annoyance. His coolness was unabashed, and he twirled the end of his dark moustache over one corner of his under lip, catching the longer hairs every

now and then with the tip of his tongue. Nothing seemed to put him out: he was quite content with being a rich man who had first-rate shooting, who was decidedly handsome, and undoubtedly six feet three in his stockings. He is handsome, he is six feet three, and he has a very large fortune, and there is nothing more to be said about him! He gives you the impression of being handsome and over six feet, and makes no other on your mind. He has no conversation himself, but he has the one virtue of never expecting any one to talk to him. I should often have forgotten his existence if Mrs Clownton had not been constantly appealing to "Master Jim,"—her "little boy," as she called him. In reply, he did little more than catch the longer hairs of his moustache upon his lower lip; yet this answer, if it could be called one, was enough to provoke a flow of the liveliest banter from the lady's ready lips. I never heard a more incessant talker than Mrs Augustus Clownton. In her presence you forgot the silence of other people: she was a sort of talking population in herself, and could cover the silence of many dummies. She had a way of addressing first one person, then another, then every one at once, which gave you the idea some one must be talking besides herself. It was only when you tried to speak, that you discovered your mistake.

The constant clatter of her everlasting banter irritated me. I thought her "chaff" and allusions in very bad taste. I was angry with David for not hating them as I did.

She took it for granted I was to be jealous of every word David might speak to Louisa, and of every little attention he might pay her. This was a standard subject of chaffing allusion. She would exclaim—"Take care, Louisa! now, really, I do advise you to be prudent! Let Mrs Scott put the sugar in her own husband's tea." And she would say ridiculous things like this, as if there were a fund of understood meaning and wit in the remark. Louisa would look languidly pleased, and laugh. David would laugh too. I would feel very hot and uncomfortable, and David would be piqued to show how ridiculous he thought me. When Mrs Clownton was by, David was almost ashamed to speak to me; if he did speak, she made a joke of it, and rallied him about it, and called him my model husband. She had the knack of separating us entirely in her presence. I do not exactly know how she did it. I only felt she had this art.

Though Mrs Clownton secretly made my life a burden to me, her subtle cruelty was invisible. No one but I seemed to see she was my enemy. She was a versatile actress both on the stage and off it; and little by little, not too suddenly at first, she took to playing the part of my ardent admirer—my quite too more than dearest of friends. Her flattery became overpowering. She puzzled me. I could not understand why she went to the trouble of paying me so many compliments, for a very great trouble it is, as I have so little that is attractive or susceptible of flattery about me. Her compliments made me feel very awkward.

Mrs Clownton was perfectly at home in my house. If I went out in the afternoon, I would find her presiding at my tea-table on my return. One day, just about five o'clock, she rushed into my drawing-room, clasping her hands together in a theatrical manner, and exclaiming—"My dear Mrs Scott! my dear Mrs Scott! I am in a state of positive, perfect despair—now, really, I am! but what can I do? what can I do? The Duchess of Wildfire says I positively must teach her her part this very afternoon, and she is going to act it to-night with Jim Verrard, and she says I must coach them both! and I wanted so to refuse, for I am positively worn out! but the duchess would not let me, and Mrs Sherbrook-Stewart told me I really must not refuse the duchess, as the duchess never, never would forgive me; and I am in perfect, perfect despair! for I did think I should have such a quiet afternoon, and that I would ask you to give me a cup of tea, and that we should all be so comfortable together." And Mrs Clownton laughed merrily. It is the fashion in Mrs Clownton's "set" to be very merry and laugh at everything and nothing. "And now do forgive me, do forgive me, my dear Mrs Scott! for I must just leave Louisa here. I cannot take her to the duchess's rehearsal, but I shall be back in no time! no time! But now, really, I must be off! Master Jim! call the carriage! Oh, you naughty, naughty boy! do be quick!"

Mrs Augustus Clownton stood in the doorway kissing hands to us and saying, "Day day! Bye bye!"

like an infant in the first stage of innocent skittishness. She was always wonderfully youthful in voice and manner, and she tied in her dress and made herself as tight and small as possible. She affected a fairy-airy sort of demeanour. "Day day! Bye bye!" and off she went, taking her "naughty boy" with her; but she was back again in no time. She came running into the room as quickly as her very high heels would let her: patter, patter, patter; up she ran to Louisa and whispered—if that could be called a whisper which we all could hear—"Don't make Mrs Scott too jealous, my dear. I warn you! I warn you!" And off she ran again; patter, patter, patter, "Bye bye!" and she was gone!

Mrs Clownton's was a stage aside, purposely intended for the public ear; yet being avowedly a whisper, it had this great advantage over an ordinary remark, that you were not bound to have heard it unless you wished. I liked to appear deaf. Yet Mrs Clownton's words were not lost upon me; I understood and resented them. They pleased Louisa. She smiled, and spoke to David in that tone of peculiar softness her voice can take at will; it is a tone which annoys me as if it were a rasp. Dropping her eyelids and looking consciously lovely, she murmured, "I am very courageous; am not I?"

To her surprise, David gave no answer. He looked painfully uncomfortable. His silence, instead of offending Louisa, excited her. I had only once before seen her really excited; it was that time at Mineham.

No one who has not seen, can imagine how excitement increases her soulless beauty. Her colour brightened. Her eyes awoke. Her face lighted with expression. My heart quailed to think how David must feel the power of her awakened beauty.

David's awkwardness soon passed off, and he appeared only too well pleased to look at Louisa and talk to her. He grew eager and eloquent. I alone was awkward. I was in pain and misery. I can taste the bitterness of that hour still by thinking of it, so keenly did I feel it.

Louisa seemed to see my wretchedness, yet only flirted the more with David. I had not thought she was clever enough to flirt so well ; but I fear it takes but little talent for one woman to make another's misery.

It was a long time, I thought, before Louisa went away, and when she did go, David escorted her home, as Mrs Clownton had not returned to fetch her.

This was only the first of several times that Mrs Augustus Clownton dropped Louisa at my house. Though she always was in positive, perfect despair, and always had some excellent excuse for doing so, I saw symptoms on Mrs Clownton's part of a wish to get rid of Louisa's constant presence. Why or wherefore I do not pretend to know. Perhaps Mr Verrard began to admire Louisa's beauty. I cannot say if this were so ; I merely saw pretty clearly, that Mrs Clownton considered two were company but three were none ; now positively none !

Sometimes Mrs Clownton would only leave Louisa for half-an-hour, sometimes for an hour, sometimes for more.

One afternoon I was obliged to go out. On my return I was surprised to find David in the house, and alone. When I entered the drawing-room he seemed unaware of my presence. He sat absorbed in his own thoughts. I touched him on the shoulder. He started on seeing me, and immediately exclaimed: "Sophy, Fred Tankney has run off with Lady Off-away!"

"Who told you so, David?"

"Louisa."

"Louisa? Was she here? Where is she?" I inquired.

"She is gone," he said; "she told me and went away."

"Why did she go away?"

David sprang to his feet—"Do you think she is a stick or a stone," he asked fiercely, "that nothing should move her?"

"But she never cared for Fred Tankney," said I.

"She hated him!" cried David, impetuously; "all along she has only cared for . . . for me! But that fellow thrust himself between us."

"David," I said, and the calmness of my own voice startled me,—it was as if I had heard some one else speak unexpectedly; "David, did she tell you that she only cared for you?"

"The secret fell from her unawares!" he said.

"It was wicked of her to tell you, David."

David faced me. He was pale with passion. "It was wicked," he said, slowly; "for it is too late! I am married now."

There was a moment's intense silence.

"David, David," I said, "would to God it were not I that stood between you and her, since you love her. Oh, my God! my God! would it were any one on earth but I!"

David only turned on his heel and left me, and went out of the house.

My heart had broken at his words.

It was late at night when David came home: sleep, or the wish to rest, had not yet come to me, and so we met again before the words David had spoken were grown cold with time. We met in silence. It was a silence, I think, each of us would fain have broken if we could; but we could not. We met as two people meet speechless at an open grave where sorrow and remorse, unclosed as yet, lie for both of them.

We met with the last illusion quite, quite dead between us.

THE END.





